Cracks in the Walls

Abagail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Survival is difficult. Although no one wants to survive the tales that are shared within, many have. Women, children, and even the occasional man has met with violence they neither deserved, and rarely escaped. These tales give hope, for survivors to escape. Connections to others like them, many of whom did escape.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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Chapter 1

Jo - Anne's Missing - Year 1

The orange locker slammed. Morning classes hadn't begun. The stillness startled Jo. Students should have been here.

"Jo!" Karen shouted down the empty hall.

"What? I'll be late. I'm going to sing with my cousin tonight."

Karen ran to her. "Any news about Anne?"

"No." Jo turned away. Anne. The cousin who had once shared her name. She had been gone for two weeks.

"She's not been her normal cheerful self. I haven't heard her preaching to anyone in the halls. Her eyes looked at the floor more than ahead the last time I saw her. And."

Hope wound its way through Jo's mind. "And?"

"She gave me her calculator. I needed it for a Trig test, and didn't have the money for a good one to only use a few times." Karen held out the scientific calculator. "Surely she meant to loan it to me for the day. I haven't seen her to return it."

Jo sighed. No help. Anne had been distant from all of the family in the valley for months. When she disappeared, it had ruptured the tight-knit family community. "Keep it for now. I'll find her. She'll be back."

Jo placed her books on the lunch table beside Karen. "Only lunch meat?"

Karen nodded.

"Look, if you need food." She had offered before.

"No. I'll manage." Karen swallowed the last bite of lunchmeat and turned to her history book. "This history book is too short. Thousands of years of history are missing."

"Yeah." Jo opened her lunch bag. Nothing looked good. Even her mom's soup didn't smell good. Karen wouldn't be able to live her dream of becoming a lawyer without proper nutrition. "Here, take the soup at least. The chips I will eat tomorrow."

"No." Karen turned back to her book.

"Yes. Take it. I think it stinks."

Karen pushed her book aside and opened the container. "Smells fine to me. Or, are you referring to Anne?"

Jo glanced around the lunchroom. "Anne. I had an email from mom."

"Tell me."

She grinned. "Not unless you eat the soup, and promise not to return it."

Karen eyed her. Her hands shook. She pushed the book away. "Give me your spoon."

At least it would give her a minute to figure out what to say.

Karen pushed the empty container and spoon back to her. "Tell me."

Jo closed her eyes. If only she knew sign language. No one would overhear the conversation. "Let's go outside."

Karen glared at her.

"I promise."

Karen gathered her books.

Jo led the way outside, and across the street to a spot where anyone approaching would be heard or seen.

"Well?"

She couldn't stall any longer. "She's pregnant."

"What? After all her religious chatter, and not even holding hands with Lennie after dating two years?" Karen laughed.

"It's not Lennie's. She married Kyle."

"What?" Karen sat down. "How can that be?"

"I've no idea. I don't know why Kyle. He is gross."

"Yeah, that playboy came from somewhere. I can't believe she fell for him."

"It's not like her." A coyote stood a few yards away in the open field. Jo motioned to show it to Karen. "This isn't the Anne I know."

"She's your cousin. Call her."

"And mom's favorite niece. I will never be like her."

"All the more reason. Does Lennie know?"

"Oh. I doubt it."

"Here he comes now." Karen shifted her books.

"I don't want to tell him."

"Tell me what?" Lennie glanced at them both. "I saw you leave the lunchroom. Is this about Anne?"

Jo glared at Karen. "We need to talk to her."

"Jo. Tell me. You owe me that."

She had convinced him to ask Anne out instead of her years ago for a family party. It had been fun to watch him escort Anne everywhere in the valley full of relatives swarming from local towns, and singing at every opportunity.

"Sit down." Jo sat on the hard ground. "Karen keep watch."

Jo described the email.

Lennie clenched his fists. "She's changed since that call. I listened and didn't push her. Maybe I should have."

"What call?"

"The one two days after her eighteenth birthday."

"I don't know about it." Jo leaned closer to listen.

"A woman called, and said she was Anne's real mom."

Jo laughed. "Is that all? Everyone knew she was adopted."

Lennie looked up with tears in his eyes. "Everyone. Except her."

"How could she not know?"

"Was it ever mentioned?"

"Doubtful. No need to. Everyone knew."

"She didn't." Lennie pounded the ground with his fist. "Until her birth mom called, and she decided she isn't worth anything, and doesn't deserve anything in life, because she doesn't live with her real family."

"Did she say that?" Karen leaned toward them.

"Yes." Lennie stared out into the open tangled underbrush. "I thought giving her time to think like she wanted was a good idea."

"We need to go see her." Karen said.

The school bell rang loud and clear.

"We will all go there tonight. I'd rather go home anyway." Jo stood up and offered her hand to Lennie. "I'm so sorry."

"Cousin Nani has this new idea she wants us to try. Thinks I'll be a star someday."

"Hey, are you two sisters?" A male she didn't recognize stood at the door.

"No. Best friends. Who are you?" Jo stared at the unknown boy in front of her.

"I'm Chris. I'm new here." He held out his hand.

"Sorry my hands are full. You are welcome to come to the Deserted Forest to listen to the singing practice. Cousin Nani Forester directs the singers." Boys. No time for them.

"I don't know where it is." His clutched books shuffled, and almost fell out of his arms.

"My mom drives the van."

"I'll ask to go another time." He ran to the side door.

Jo's mom waited in the Deserted Forest van. "Have a good day?"

"Hear from Anne?" Jo held the door open and watched her mom's face.

Her mom winced. "She's home. We will talk about it later."

Jo put her hand on her mom's arm. "No mom. Now."

The side door slid open and a few more students climbed in.

"Later." Her mom gripped the steering wheel so hard, her seasoned hands turned paper white.

Jo leaned back in the seat. What had gone so wrong? Aunt Mary had been in tears for two weeks. Uncle Dan had driven to White Sands looking for Anne. He'd even promised to drive to Roswell if she wasn't found. Someone there would surely find her.

At Deserted Forest, her mom parked the van.

The other students hurried out to prepare for an evening of music.

Her mom walked around to help her carry the box of snacks. "She's not well."

"I figured that much." Jo pulled the door shut.

Her mom put her hand on her shoulder and looked her in the eyes. "Anne and Kyle eloped. Aunt Mary and Uncle Dan are shocked. They went to talk to Kyle's father."

"She was engaged to Lennie. She has been for two years. Why?"

"I don't know. You are going to have to talk to her. It can't be true." Her mom sat back in her seat.

"Did she say why?"

"No." Her mom turned away. "I have to go pick up a few more people. Be back later."

"Wait for me. I'll go with you." Jo stalked off to the house carrying a box of chips.

The front door opened. Kyle blocked the entrance.

Jo stopped.

"Hi Jo. Anne and I are back. My baby will be here next year." Kyle's hands rested on his hips. His grin was too big for his face.

She shivered. "Is Anne here with you?"

"Of course not! She is at home. Where she will remain."

Not good. Where had Kyle come from? When had he appeared in town? "I need to go to the kitchen."

He moved out of the opening enough to let her pass.

She hugged the box tighter and walked through the door.

Kyle patted her bottom.

"You choose Anne. Leave me alone."

"You wouldn't have me."

"No." Jo walked to the kitchen. She wanted to run. To take Anne. And run far away. That wouldn't be fair to Aunt Mary and Uncle Dan.

Chapter 2

Lennie - Questions - Year 1

Lennie plopped his change into the drink machine. An orange soda wouldn't cure the fear in his stomach, and might not even quench his thirst. A mouth this dry was fear dry.

He opened the can and drained it in one motion. His tongue clung like cotton to the roof of his mouth.

Someone tapped his shoulder. "May I have a turn?"

He turned to see the new student who had spoken to Jo and Karen earlier. "Sure." He stepped out of the way.

As he plopped in his change, the new boy turned to him. "Why are you three sullen? Were you dating one of them, and then decided to date her friend?"

Lennie laughed. "No. The one I was dating. I won't tell that story here."

The younger students ran past him, and almost knocked the soda out of his hand. "Too many people. I don't even know you."

"I'm Chris Stoney. Do you know everyone here?"

"Pretty much. Been here almost all my life."

Chris waved his empty hand toward the outside door. "Let's talk."

"What about class?" Skipping class wasn't something Lennie did lightly.

"Will you be paying attention?"

"Not likely." Lennie followed him out the door.

They leaned against the walls surrounding the door on the tiny porch that led to the teacher's parking area.

"Hope we aren't caught." If there was a way Lennie could leave and talk to Anne now. Maybe she would listen.

"We aren't doing anything illegal."

"Maybe not."

"I know we aren't. What is going on?" Chris sipped his soda.

"Why should I trust you?"

"I'm new here. I know none of you. I am able to see in from the outside." He squashed the empty can.

"Six months ago, I asked a friend if she would marry me after graduation. We even began the planning. I picked out her engagement ring. I scraped and saved money for it. It took two years." He shuffled his feet.

"What happened?"

"She found out she had been adopted. She pushed me away and dated someone new to town. He is dangerous. He pushes her around. I've seen him. He rarely makes it to school. Teachers don't like him."

"You want to save her?"

"She ran off and married him."

Chris closed his eyes. "How dangerous?"

"She's had three black eyes and a broken nose since she began dating him."

"She is over eighteen?"

"Yes. The call that changed her life came two days later."

"Legally, there is nothing we can do until the baby is born and abused. Even then, it'll be difficult."

"How do you know?"

Chris smiled. "My parents. Mom is a social worker. Dad a security officer. Used to work near White Sands. I plan to go to police academy two weeks after graduation."

The door opened. "What are you two doing out here?"

Lennie moved to unblock the opening to the cars. The astronomy teacher. He was known to be harsh on students outside of class. "Showing Chris around. He's new."

"Why outside?"

"I don't hear so well." Chris touched his ear. "Too many students talking. Needed to hear what I need to know about teachers and classes to find out if I am ahead or behind."

The teacher grunted. "Back inside. You both deserve detention."

Lennie led the way back inside the now quiet halls. "Thanks."

"No problem. Where is the Calculus classroom?"

Lennie led the way. After he left Chris at the classroom door, he walked down the hall to the high school counselor's office.

Her office was a quiet refuge for those in need. A place they could rest and recover. Today the door was closed. He sat in a chair and waited.

The door opened. A man walked out. He nodded to Lennie.

The counselor ushered him in. "Are you here to plan your career options?"

"I did that last week."

She peered over her glasses at him. "Yes. I think you did. What do you need today?"

He repeated what Jo had told him, and included what Chris said. "Is it true? Nothing you can do?"

"Tell me her name?"

"Anne Rhoden."

She typed it into her computer. "Due to confidentiality laws, I can't tell you anything. Sorry. Can't help you in that regard." The counselor did not close out the screen. She dropped her hands in her lap.

"Lennie. You have a wonderful heart. I wish I could help you. Neither of you deserve what has happened to you both."

"Is there anything I can do?"

She smiled. "Yes. Join a group. Become a policeman. Or my job, after I retire of course. Become a social worker. There are many ways to keep your heart and mind open helping others."

Her phone rang. "I have to take this." She picked up the phone and stepped into the small room behind the main office.

Lennie leaned forward. He turned the screen toward him. His face dropped. The word "Withdrawn" splashed across the screen. He pushed it back into place.

Withdrawn? With only a few months left of high school? How about their dreams for college, starting a life, and family?

The inner door opened and the counselor returned. "Sorry. I am going to have to ask you to go back to class. I have a client arriving in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

She smiled and held out her hand. "Thanks for all your help in the food and clothing drive. They help so many people. I'll be sure to look into Anne's case. I can't tell you anything."

He nodded and turned away. As he walked out the door, warm tears rolled down his cheek.

Chapter 3

Jo - Anne Disappears Again - Year 1

Karen and Lennie walked out of the school building.

Jo stepped out to meet them. "Wait here. Don't let anyone interrupt." They couldn't go to singing practice tonight. Not after what Kyle had done.

"Sure?" Karen said.

"Yeah."

Jo hurried up to the van and opened the door. "Mom."

Her mom closed whichever magazine she was reading. "Come on. Where is everyone?"

"Mom. Lennie, Karen, and I are going to our house tonight. Cousin Nani will have to practice without us."

Her mom's lips trembled. "Are you sure? The Deserted Forest won't be the same without you. It won't be a good practice."

"We need to study. For a test. And we won't be here next year anyway, if we go to college."

"I'll drop you three off at our house. Stay safe."

Jo waved Lennie and Karen to the van.

A few other students followed along behind.

Singing had lost its connection. It had drifted away almost as far as Anne.

The sound of babbling teens flittered to the front seat.

She didn't talk much. Hopefully her mom wouldn't notice her silence. She needed to think. What would she say to Anne?

Her mom pulled into the valley driveway. Three of her mom's sisters lived here. No cars were in any of her aunt's driveways. That didn't mean no one was home.

Jo stepped out of the van. "Thanks mom. We'll talk later."

"Karen, when do I need to pick you up to take you home?" Jo's mom asked.

Karen glanced at Jo, and then back at Jo's mom. "How about two hours? That should be plenty of time."

"Have fun!" Jo's mom pulled the van around and down the driveway.

"As if." Lennie shouldered his bag. He stared at Aunt Mary's porch where he had spent many days and evenings with Anne.

"Come on. We'll drop our backpacks off." Jo walked to her front door.

They gathered around the kitchen table.

"Will we scare her?" Lennie asked.

Karen sipped water. "We have to go. Her life may depend on it."

"Lennie, will you stay here and watch for Kyle? If he arrives, keep him busy."

"Will he expect you to be at Cousin Nani's?" Lennie glanced out the window.

"Yes. Come on Karen."

"I'm scared." Karen dropped the glass on the table.

"For her, or us?" Jo opened the door.

"Both."

They walked across the gravel drive. Every rock crunched as loud as if it had been thrown against a metal barn door, and rattled all the way down.

Aunt Mary's house leaned to one side. The double wide trailer had been through more than one twister. The indention of a cow had crushed the wall next to the front door, and never been fully repaired.

"I shouldn't be afraid to visit my cousin. I never have been before."

"This drive used to be filled with laughing cousins playing chase. I remember being here too when I was young. Then mom got sick, and we moved to town." Karen rubbed her hands. Her mother lived in a wheelchair now, and needed her daughter to help with daily tasks.

A long winding drive. No people, or vehicles in sight. Jo stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door.

"Go away," Anne said.

"No. We need to check on you."

"Go away. It isn't safe. If Kyle finds out you're here." Anne sniffled.

"Anne, let us in. I'm your cousin. He should be glad you have family."

"No. Go away. He only lets my fake mom and fake dad in."

"They aren't fake! They raised you." Jo pushed at the door that had never been locked before. Now, it was tightly locked.

"They are fake. My real mom is a drug addict who gave me up while in prison. She doesn't know who my real father is. Go before Kyle returns."

"Anne, you should not fear your husband." Karen spoke through the cracked window.

"It says so in the book. Now go." Anne's voice was almost hysterical.

The book. Of course. She had followed the book in black and white with no understanding of the grey areas. Or the contradictions contained within. "Please. Your parents care about you."

Tires crunched on the lane. It was a strange pickup truck they had never seen.

Karen touched her arm, and they hid behind an old tattered couch.

Lennie peered across the driveway at them.

Jo waved back with a wait command.

The truck parked. Kyle swung out. "Get out here Anne."

The trailer door opened. Anne's dress didn't fit properly across her pregnant belly. Her eyes were red. Tears stained her cheeks. Her posture drooped. She was barely standing. Without looking up at the man she had married. Not the strong confident person she had been a few months before.

"Where is Jo?"

Anne struggled to speak.

"I asked you a question, and expect an instant answer. Where is Jo?"

"I don't know."

He grabbed her arm and jerked her toward him. "Is she in the house?"

"No. That hurts."

"I'll show you hurt." Kyle shoved her to the ground and stalked into the house.

"Anne!" Karen hissed.

Anne ignored her.

Jo wanted to run and save her. She crawled around the couch.

Kyle stepped out the door and threw something into the truck. "Come on. You are coming with me." He grabbed Anne and shoved her into the passenger's seat. He slammed the door. Part of Anne's dress hung below the door frame. It vibrated in the breeze.

The truck tore out of the driveway spewing gravel everywhere.

"I should have saved her." Jo clenched her hands.

"There was no time. Too dangerous." Karen closed the broken front door.

"He had a gun." Lennie ran up to the porch. "Surprised he didn't shoot himself the way he was carrying it in his waistband."

"Now I have to explain what happened to my mom and to Aunt Mary." Jo turned away from her friends.

"Not without us." Karen hugged her.

Lennie touched her shoulder. "We were here. There was nothing anyone could do."

"She brought up her religion, and said it told her she had to do this."

Karen closed her eyes. "Happens too often. If I did everything my mom's religion said I should do, I'm not sure I'd go to school."

"Anne's religion was everything to her. She was the model of what she believed." Lennie led them back to Jo's porch. "Do you think it will help her escape?"

"Not soon." Karen sat down on the steps. "The stats aren't good for people living in domestic violence situations to escape. Particularly women who are pregnant. Legally, that ties her to him for the rest of her life."

A young kitten climbed into Jo's lap and purred.

"He is cruel." Jo pushed the kitty away. No energy for cats with this pain of losing the cousin who was almost like a sister.

"We have to do something." Lennie picked up the kitten.

"We can't. She's an adult now." Karen moved a loose board. "Unless we change the law. Even then, it may be too late for her."

Lennie covered his face. "I won't let that happen! She is my life. And he stole her. And hurt her. No one should ever hurt anyone."

The Deserted Forest van pulled into the driveway.

"We will do something." Jo stood up.

Chapter 4

Lennie - Janella Lamar - Year 10

Air conditioning blasted the sparse office. The cold breeze didn't cool the air much as heat flared through the windows from the desert sunshine.

Lennie tapped his pencil.

His next client was late. Nothing unusual. Many never showed. His notepad sat beside the computer. What was her name? Oh. Janella. Hopefully, she had gone to Tracie and was safe.

Case File

Focus: Janella Lamar, female, age 30
Reporter: Chris Stoney, male 28
Abuser: Self
Abuse type: Neglect
Family:
Son - Brenton, male, age 4
Daughter - Carina, daughter, age 1
Sister in Colorado, age 28

Interview

Something shuffled down the hallway.

He stood up and walked to the open door.

A woman in a wheelchair with a baby on her lap, and toddler beside her, moved down the hall.

"May I help you?"

She glanced at a door. "I'm late for an appointment. Are you Lennie?"

He nodded. "May I help you in the door?"

She glared at him. "I'd manage fine, if this building were up to ADA standards."

He stepped back. "I can't control that. It's state run."

She stopped in front of him. "I know."

He scurried back around his desk.

Janella twisted and turned her chair to fit in the door.

The toddler pushed the desk chair over and climbed in it.

The woman pulled up beside it and stopped. She locked the brakes and settled her infant on her lap. "Thank you Brenton."

The boy squirmed.

"Would you please close the door?"

Brenton nodded. He scrambled down from the too tall chair and toddled over to the door. He peeked up and down the hall before he closed it, waiting until he heard it click shut. The boy ran back to the chair and scrambled up to the seat.

Janella turned to Lennie. "I'm here. Inspector Chris Stoney sent me."

"How may I help you?"

Janella leaned forward. "Does my son look abused to you?"

How to answer that? "No."

"Someone reported me as abusing my son, and my baby daughter. I want to know who and why. Inspector Stoney told me to come to you."

And hadn't warned him.

"Any more information?" Lennie tapped at the computer. Maybe Chris was available for a secure chat.

"No. He was sent to inspect my home and verify I wasn't abusing my children."

"Did he talk to you and your son? His name is Brenton?"

"Yes. He looked all through my home. It is mostly empty, so that I am able to move around."

"Understandably." Lennie turned to the young boy. "Are you happy at home?"

The boy nodded.

"You have clean clothes?"

Another nod.

"You have food every day?"

Brenton nodded.

"And toys to play with?"

Another nod.

"Seems the only problem he has is not speaking."

Janella laughed. "He talks. All the time at home. And plays with his little sister."

Chris hadn't responded on any of the channels.

"Perhaps a misunderstanding? Any new neighbors? New to school?" Lennie glanced at the computer, and back to Brenton.

"No. Brenton is too young for school. Maybe the person who delivers my groceries turned us in. A few weeks ago."

Now we are getting somewhere.

Brenton wiggled in his chair. "My fault. Doggy wet, and I fell."

Lennie laughed. "Are you saying you chased a dog in the sprinkler?"

Brenton shook his head.

Janella smiled. "That day. It could be. We were puppy sitting. While making chocolate chip cookies, the young puppy peed on poor Brenton. He fell into the puddle. After he caught the puppy, and put it outside in the portable dog pen, the doorbell rang."

Lennie laughed. "You had puppy pee, and what looked like poop all over you when you answered the door young man?"

Brenton nodded.

"And I bet the house was a mess from a wet puppy flying all over."

He nodded again.

"What did Inspector Chris say?"

"The pup had returned home. The house was back to normal. Mostly. There are a few spots I can't reach, and don't want Brenton to clean."

That would be a sticking point. "Do you have anyone to help you?"

"No. Not at this time. My sister moved to Colorado a year ago."

Lennie leaned back. "I will help you find services. Tell me more about you. Do you work?"

Janella laughed. "No. Carina is too young for me to leave her with anyone. Not sure who I'd trust either."

A yellow flag. More needed to be known about that.

Brenton squirmed.

"Tell me more about you. Do you have anyone to help you since your sister left?"

"A neighbor's daughter helped. Until she went off to college last month. Even if she had been here, she couldn't have helped that day."

"No. Brenton, how long was it before you were able to clean up."

"After helping mom."

"He was almost dry by the time the groceries were in. Heat will do that. We put them away quickly, and then cleaned him up. No need for ice cream to melt."

The boy nodded.

"True. I will contact Tracie, and she may be able to find someone trustworthy to help with a little cleaning, and other needed chores. I have to ask what your disability is?"

"I injured my spinal cord when I fell while working on a building I designed in Albuquerque." Janella adjusted her daughter. "I don't abuse my kids. I care for them. Brenton is big enough to help."

Lennie smiled. "I don't doubt you care for them. We all need a little help. No one should do it alone. Do you know your neighbors?"

"Not as well as I would like. They are all busy."

Rescue

A message popped up from Chris. "What do you need?"

"Hold on one moment Janella." Lennie turned to the computer and typed. "Janella."

A pause.

"Needs home care. Nothing more at this time. Tracie."

Chris's words sounded right. Tracie would monitor the situation. Perhaps one of the teens working with her would help Janella.

Release

"I'll contact Tracie, and have her send someone out to help clean, and other small chores."

Janella grunted. "I am able to do somethings."

A healthy stubborn streak. "I'm sure you are. There are things I am no longer able to do that people have to help me with."

"I have a conference call tomorrow. My ability to draw designs isn't diminished. I'm going to figure out how to have my clients come to me. Soon Carina will be big. She can play for an hour or so each day, and I will work on the computer."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"Brenton, you may open the door." Janella backed up and rolled her chair to the door.

Brenton jumped up and raced to open the door before his mom reached it.

The boy closed the door behind him, his mother, and his sister.

On the surface, this case looked like it would go to the pending pile. What was Brenton afraid of?

Lennie tapped the number to call Tracie. Tracie would find the answer, if there was one.

Chapter 5

Sabrina, Antonen, Bailey, and Daisy - Year 10

The bus creaked to a stop in front of the Deserted Forest home. Jo turned off the ignition.

Cousin Nani stood beside the door. "I need to find the music from last night. I won't be long. I forgot it."

"No problem."

Her cousin rushed into the house.

A good chance to check her messages. Jo clicked her phone on. Three messages. Two from Karen. She clicked the oldest. One hour ago.

"Contact me on the secure message program."

Wouldn't have been possible while driving, even if she had heard the beep over the bus engine.

Message two from Karen. Ten minutes ago. "Vital message from Lennie. We need to make our plans, and fast."

Karen's cryptic message didn't leave much open for debate. The project would have to be completed soon.

She tapped into the secure message center.

A one word note from Lennie. "Sabrina."

One encrypted note from Karen. "Anne."

Jo gasped. Time to do something now.

Cousin Nani stepped back onto the bus. "Ready now. It was under the table in the hall. Must have fallen out of my bag."

"I have to send messages. On the secure line."

"Are you leaving us?" Nani put her hand on Jo's shoulder.

"Shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

Nani touched Jo's chin, and lifted it up to look into Jo's eyes. "For how much longer? Your voice trembles when you sing. You focus more on your gadgets, trying to find our missing cousin."

"I have to. It's my fault."

"I won't argue with you. If you do decide you would rather chase the ghosts of the past than the songs of the future, please help me find a good driver and equipment manager. I will miss you."

"Sorry. I will help you find a new manager. I'll ask Tracie. May I ask?"

Nani let go of her chin. "Yes?"

"I'm thinking I'm going to need startup funds myself. I've scrimped and saved every penny you have given me. It isn't enough."

Her cousin laughed. "Obviously. You'd run around in rags if I let you. We will discuss it later. Tonight. I promise. Go write your messages." Nani walked back to her couch seat in the middle of the bus.

Jo pulled out her tablet. She logged into the more detailed messages.

Case File

Focus: Sabrina Jarvis, female, age 35
Reporter: Karen Cole, female, age 28
Abuser: Antonen Jarvis, male, age 38
Abuse type: Physical and emotional
Family:
Husband - Antonen Jarvis, male, age 38
Son - Bailey, male, age 11
Daughter - Daisy, female, age10

"Anne." The message was short. Three scrambled lines. She clicked the unscrambler. A red spatula flipped a few times. "An aborted fetus, about the right age found in a waste water purification system two months after she disappeared. Can't name the town. It has been over ten years now; the newspaper report is clear."

Aborted? It could have been a natural miscarriage. It was found in the waste water treatment plant. That usually occurred earlier, and to women who didn't know they were pregnant. They might not even know they miscarried.

Something about it was wrong. Her response would be as cryptic. "Not sure it is hers. Think otherwise. Any other updates?" Jo clicked the link. The spatula flipped multiple times. The message and response disappeared.

She clicked the link labeled Sabrina. The spatula flipped. "Needs help. Daughter and son. Son must be separated."

The message wavered and disappeared. Lennie wasn't taking any chances.

Jo turned to face her cousin. "May we stop at Lennie's office?"

Nani covered her eyes. "The bus will not fit in his parking lot. Stop at the school, and walk. We need to be there in half an hour anyway."

"Sorry." Jo turned on the ignition and drove down the twisted drive.

Cousin Nani tottered up to the seat beside her. "Nothing to be sorry about. You are ready to move on. I understand."

"It's just." Jo turned onto the next street.

"I know. You'll find her, if she wants to be found. I should have let you go a long time ago."

"Why didn't you?"

Nani laughed. "I had to wait until you were ready. I don't want to push you out in the cold cruel world alone."

"I'm not alone. I have Karen, Tracie, Lennie, and even Chris." She pulled into the school parking lot.

"They are your friends. You don't have a partner. Any more than I do."

Jo parked and turned off the ignition. "Why don't you?"

"Men are interested in my songs, and how the music makes them feel. Not in me, as a person." Nani stood up and walked out the open door. "Lock up. I'm going for a walk."

Jo stepped out of the bus carrying a bottle of water. There, not far away was the place where she, Karen, and Lennie had discussed Anne's situation over a decade ago. It looked the same. Even a coyote was there, much as that day, which could have been only yesterday. She blinked back tears. The walk to Lennie's office would be hot and dry.

She reached his office on the corner of a busy street. After a few sips of water, she was ready to walk in.

The receptionist wasn't even there.

"Lennie, are you here?"

He peeked around the corner of his door. "I hoped you would come here before leaving for the concert tonight."

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Come in, and let me turn on the sound machine."

"Does it work?"

"I don't think so. It's required." Lennie clicked the button. The screen crept up his computer, as if watching a slow printed copy emerge. "Sabrina is a bad story. Reminds me of Anne. Only worse."

"How so?" Jo stood beside him.

"She has been married twelve years. Her husband Antonen put their son, Bailey, on meds the moment he was born. Daisy arrived a few years later."

"What is the worst?"

"Father medically abuses son. Verbally and emotionally abuses wife and daughter. Then, son moves on to abuse mom and sister. The abuse of the daughter has moved beyond verbal and physical."

Jo closed her eyes. "Don't say it."

"I can't. It sickens me."

"Did you alert Tracie?" Jo stepped back and bumped into the windowsill.

"No. It isn't safe for them to stay in town. I've alerted Karen. We need to take Sabrina and Daisy to Albuquerque. Legally, it'll be difficult. She can do it. And send Bailey somewhere."

"Where? Anyone would argue he should be with his mother, or near his doctors."

Lennie turned to look in her face. "I've no idea. He needs to learn how to live with women, as equals, not as objects."

"You've met him?"

He nodded. "I had Tracie with me at the school visit. His attitude toward her was unbelievable. More like an 18-year-old with out-of-control hormones."

"We have to do something. What else is in there?" Jo pointed to the computer file.

"A note from Chris. The reason we even found out. Bailey stole his mother's car and rammed it into a neighbor's shed. Shed and car are demolished."

Jo closed her eyes. "What does Sabrina say?"

Lennie touched her chin.

She opened her eyes.

"The book says I have to stay with him. The preacher says I can't leave. She says what he is doing to Daisy won't hurt her."

"Sabrina needs help. How old is Daisy?" It would hurt her. For as long as she lived.

"Daisy is ten."

And possibly longer. "How long has this been going on?" Jo grabbed the windowsill to steady herself.

"Unsure. She won't talk about it. Typical, according to Tracie."

"We rescue them and take them where?" She glanced out the window, as if that would give her an answer.

"Karen is trying to find out. We will rescue the kids from school. No idea how to rescue Sabrina. Antonen is homebound with a broken leg. She no longer has a vehicle."

"Not even his?"

"It won't start. Seems the key was broke off in the ignition." Lennie turned back to the computer. "I know you have to go tonight. Sorry to worry you."

"If only." Jo glanced back at the desk.

"What?"

"Sabrina and Daisy could be hid on the bus in plain sight. I could drop them off." Jo grasped at the straws of an idea.

"Sabrina yes. Daisy no."

"Yes to both."

Lennie grabbed her hands. "No Jo. Not with the current laws. Unless we file a no contact order against both Antonen and Bailey, we can't rescue them without Antonen's permission, and his knowledge of their whereabouts. Karen and Chris have reminded us many times."

Jo pulled away. "We have to do something."

"Karen is working on it. It has to be case by case. You know that."

"It's time. How long does it take a life and death matter law to be passed?"

Lennie turned to his computer. "Too long. Unless it happens to someone important in the government. Someone everyone likes. Who will fix the situation for them."

"We will uncover an event."

"It has to be current."

"Perhaps. I have to go now." Jo stalked out of the office.

Chapter 6

Sabrina, Antonen, Bailey, and Daisy - Year 10

The notes on the screen dimmed as the moments passed and the laptop went into sleep mode. A move of the mouse would wake it.

Lennie didn't move the mouse. He leaned back in his chair.

Janella had been almost a breath of fresh air. If all cases were simply people who needed a helper in their lives. Those were the cases he liked best. They should be over and done in one visit. Even follow up calls, or emails, were quick and easy to answer.

Sabrina was one of the tougher cases. The laws did not protect her, or her children. His hands were tied. Almost as much as Sabrina and Daisy's.

Perhaps more so. Because I am outside looking in, and should be able to help.

It was as if the law held up a stop sign and proclaimed because the children were underage, they had to stay in a dangerous place, around dangerous people.

Of course, there were the stories. Of children who had been "rescued," to be placed in a foster home as bad, or worse, away from the few people in their lives who helped them. Whether those good people had been a family member in the abusive home, a neighbor, or a teacher. Was it worse abuse to take a child from their support system, and throw them into a strange new environment without the education and mental help to avoid falling into the same trap with new people?

After six years, I should be immune to the inconsistencies between the laws and common sense.

His hands reached for the photo frame on his printer stand. The photo of better days. Anne beside him on the porch swing of her parent's home. Taken by Jo. On Anne's eighteenth birthday. Two weeks before Kyle arrived to steal her.

Yes. Theft is exactly what it was. Kyle had stolen Anne. And their unborn child. Since Anne was legally eighteen, it couldn't be

called a kidnapping. The police of the time had done nothing other than file a missing person's report.

A tear dropped on the glass frame. It joined the others that had gone before, and rolled off to the floor.

He sat the frame back up on the printer, and arranged the fake flowers. Flowers Anne had worn in the picture. Her mom had given them to him to remember her by.

Daisy had to be saved.

He clicked the mouse.

The computer woke up.

Lennie flicked through the screens to the message center. "Chris. Stop by tonight." He clicked enter and waited.

His personal phone rang. Karen.

"Hello?" Lennie closed his eyes to focus on the words.

"Is Jo there?"

"She stomped out about ten minutes ago."

"I need to meet with the three of you in two days. Have Chris take Daisy and Sabrina to Tracie. Leave Bailey. He'll have to fend for himself."

"You sure that is a good idea?" Lennie tapped his pencil.

"We have no indication that Antonen is a danger to Bailey, other than insisting he take meds for whatever disorder he convinced the doctors the boy had as a newborn."

He woke the computer and scanned the file. "I think it was ADHD."

"Can't be properly diagnosed until age six, after other mimics have been ruled out. He was on meds before age two. Who knows what the chemicals have done to his brain."

"He can't join Sabrina and Daisy?"

"No. He is a danger. Although innocent until proven guilty, there are too many points against him. We can't take the risk."

"I'll bring them out without an incident."

There was a knock at the open door.

"Have to go." He hung up.

"Come in."

"You needed me?" Chris stepped into the room.

"Karen said to take Sabrina and Daisy to Tracie without incident." Lennie stared at the picture. He hadn't done anything that day. Today would not be the same.

Chris closed the door and sat down in front of Lennie. "I have an idea. My sister has a daughter Daisy's age. I'll have her talk to Daisy tomorrow at school."

"That won't help them tonight. And will place your niece in danger."

"I don't think Sabrina and Daisy are in any more danger tonight, than they have been for years. Zadema knows Daisy."

"Does she understand the dangers?" Lennie twisted his hands.

"She does. She has read enough mystery novels to be able to communicate secretly with Daisy. They developed their own sign language a few months back."

"Really?"

"Yes. Daisy was so sad, and Zadema needed to know why."

"It worked? Weren't the teachers angry?" Lennie leaned forward.

"They have quite a few feeling words. The teachers have no idea how much talking they are doing in class. Or, they don't say anything to the girls."

"I wish I could say they need to be learning. Or, at least learning what they go to school to learn." Lennie glanced at the picture. Would this wait be a mistake?

"Zadema will text me when to be ready. Be waiting. It could happen at any moment." Chris stood up. "It's almost time to go home. How about dinner together for old time's sake?"

Lennie shut down his computer. "Let's go. We will have to figure out how to save Bailey later."

"Bailey can take care of himself." Chris followed him from the room.

Chris drove past Sabrina and Antonen's house on the way to the diner they ate at, at least twice a week. "There it is. They might suspect something if we slow down, or stop tonight."

It was a partially dilapidated half brick, half siding shack. A curtain waved in the breeze of an open window. Outdoor temperatures were above 90 degrees. A broken bike rested by the front porch, one wheel bent almost in half.

The presence of fear was almost as strong as when Anne had been stolen.

Lennie closed his eyes until they reached the diner.

Interview

At noon the next day, Lennie responded to emails, and waited on a client's response.

A text from Chris buzzed through. "Time. Be at the door."

Lennie shut his computer down and grabbed his tablet.

Chris pulled into the drop off zone as Lennie stepped out the door.

Lennie opened the car door. "So soon?"

"Yes. We are going to the house. You are to tell Sabrina that Daisy is in the nurse's office and needs to go to the hospital for a broken arm. She was injured at lunch when a podium fell off the stage and knocked her down, with her arm bent backwards against the table."

Lennie clutched his laptop. "Is all of this true?"

"You better believe it. Sabrina must join us. Antonen will have to stay to take care of Bailey when he gets home from school." Chris steered the car toward the home of Sabrina and Antonen.

He'd find out the truth soon enough. Now he had to use the skills he had honed so long to convince Sabrina to leave.

At the stop sign, Chris waited for a moment. "Zadema said to be sure and ask Sabrina to bring Sashy. I'm assuming that is her favorite doll, or something."

Lennie laughed.

Chris pulled up to a stop at the home. "Sabrina has already been called by the school nurse. She is expecting you."

Lennie gulped. He opened the door and stepped out.

The yard was mostly dirt. The broken bike had not been moved. A few tufts of hardy grass hung on close to the windows. One window, close to the ground, was framed by two broken clay pots with cactus spilling out. The curtains billowed in one window. It was 95 degrees, and rising outside.

Rescue

He reached the door and knocked.

The door creaked open and stuck on a dirty carpeted floor.

"Come in," the woman said. "I am Sabrina. How is Daisy?"

"I'm not sure. I'm here to take you to her."

"She can't go." A man on the couch gestured at Sabrina. "Who would take care of me? I need food and drink. I have a broken leg."

"Antonen."

"Daisy's a child. She will be healed by dinner time."

Lennie blinked. "Sabrina needs to take Daisy to the hospital for X-rays."

"Who will feed me then?"

"Bailey will be home in a few hours. He will help you."

"Don't think so. The boy is on meds himself. He needs his mother here. And his sister."

Lennie shivered.

"Antonen, I need to go bring Daisy home. We shouldn't be too long. X-rays don't take long."

The man shifted on the couch. "Go on then. Be back before dark. I'll lay here in my wet clothes until you return."

"Daisy asked for Sashy."

Sabrina smiled. "I'll get her." She returned with an odd-looking hand sewn and stuffed creature.

"Don't be gone long," Antonen said.

"As long as I have to," Sabrina said.

Lennie stepped out the door.

Sabrina pulled it shut behind her. She led the way to the car, with her head held high.

Once in the car, Chris drove to the school. He stopped at the front door. "Sabrina, I'll be waiting on you, Daisy, and Lennie."

She nodded. "Is Daisy okay?"

"I don't know. She is in the nurse's office." Chris turned away. "Zadema is with her."

Lennie led the way to the doors. He held the door open for Sabrina.

She lifted her eyes and stared at him before she went through.

They were escorted to the nurse's office.

Zadema blocked the door. "Good. You are here. Come in."

Lennie and Sabrina stepped into the tiny office.

The door closed fast behind Zadema. "We have to take her to Tracie's. She has vomited all morning."

"Doesn't she need to go to the hospital?" Lennie asked.

Zadema turned to her. "No good now. She needs rest. She doesn't have the energy for what they would put her through. Tracie will call the medical team. They may send her to Albuquerque for full care."

"I thought that wasn't possible. Where is she?"

"In the next exam room. The nurse will talk to her mother now, while I update you."

Sabrina turned white and stepped into the door that Zadema opened.

Zadema closed the door. "It's not a broken arm. She's pregnant."

Lennie blinked. "We were too late."

"One night would have made no difference." Zadema turned away. "Uncle Chris said you would feel guilty it lasted another night."

"Yes."

"Last night was tough, worse for me. I know how to obtain the meds for a miscarriage. Don't tell Uncle Chris."

The door opened. Sabrina led Daisy through. "We have to go now."

"I'm going with you." Zadema followed them.

"Don't you have to go back to class?" Lennie said. "The car can't hold five."

"We will make it hold five." She ushered them through the halls.

Chris drove carefully through town to Tracie's.

Sabrina and Daisy kept their heads down so no one would see them.

Tracie met them at the car. "Hurry now." She helped Sabrina out.

Daisy toddled between the two women.

Zadema followed carrying the odd bundle called Sashy.

"Go on," Chris said. "I'll pick you up later."

Release

Lennie followed them up the stairs into the waiting area. Men were not allowed past this room. In fact, the gate was up keeping them locked on this side.

Tracie pushed the button to close the gate across the front door.

Now, they were gated into this room.

"Decisions have to be made," Tracie said.

Zadema handed Sashy to Daisy.

Daisy smiled, took the stuffed creature, and shoved her hand deep inside. "I saved the jewelry and my few belongings that mattered to me and mom. Protect us please."

Tracie pushed the young girl's hand back. "No. You may need them later. Now, we need to decide how to take you safely to medical help. We have the evidence we need to take you to a safe place."

"The nurse destroyed it."

Tracie picked up a loose piece of clothing. "I don't think so. Do you need more medical care?"

"I need a nap and food." Daisy leaned back against the chair.

"She's right. Nurse said the bleeding stopped. She'll be fine." Zadema leaned toward Lennie.

"Lennie, you stay here while I settle them in."

Lennie sat stiffly on one of the couches.

Tracie led Sabrina, Daisy, and Zadema behind the gate. It clanged shut, with him locked in the holding cell between worlds.

He had been here before, and left before they went inside the inner gate.

Chapter 7

Jo - Ruby Duffy - Year 10

The bus coasted to a stop in front of the auditorium. A two hour wait until the concert, an hour concert, and then two-hour drive back home. Plus, waiting on the teens to be picked up by weary parents. It'd be 8:30 before she made it home tonight. No time to work on her project.

Nani stopped as she followed the teens out the door. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'll join you all shortly. I'm not singing in the concert."

"Your voice will be missed."

Jo pushed her phone into a small travel bag. "I want to enjoy listening. If I do go and work elsewhere, I want a memory of what I was part of."

"You are always welcome to come back." Nani stepped off the bus.

Jo followed and locked the door behind her.

She walked into the auditorium and chose a seat in the front row where she could watch and listen closely. She pulled her phone out and studied the HTML and CSS requirements for the program she and Karen were building.

"May we sit here?" A woman with a young son and a toddler asked.

"Sure." Jo turned back to her phone.

The boy sat in the seat next to her, and the girl collapsed at his feet.

"I'm Ruby Duffy. Nani said her cousin would be out here." The woman watched her.

The name reminded her of something. Not sure what. She turned off the phone. "I'm Jo Forester. Sit down and tell me about yourself. Your name sounds familiar."

Ruby laughed. "You probably saw my name in a commercial. My sister, Tarina Owens, was elected senator last year."

"I don't watch much television." In fact, the last time the television had been on was the night Anne disappeared for good.

No one could bear the news reports of her missing. The habit of turning it on had been broken. "It might have been in an announcement, or in the news."

"Do you enjoy the concerts?" Ruby patted her son's head.

"I usually sing in them. It's time for me to move on to a project dear to my heart."

"Those are nice. That's why I joined the Olympics Planning Committee." Ruby touched her daughter's head with her shoe. "Don't wonder off Lucy."

Lucy stuck her thumb in her mouth and crawled back to sit in front of her mother.

The doors opened in the back of the auditorium.

Ruby stiffened.

A few people walked in and chose a row to the right of them.

"You okay?"

Ruby clutched her program. "I am here to relax. It's not working."

The boy twisted in his seat. He ducked down.

Ruby turned to the back door.

A tall shadow blocked the exit.

Jo gulped. There was something else that had been said about Ruby Duffy. Recently. By Karen.

"Hide."

"Too late. He saw me."

The boy whimpered.

"Take your sister and crawl away." Jo twisted more to watch the shadow.

Ruby touched her arm. "No. He'll hurt them. He carries at least one gun. And a knife."

The tall shadow glided toward them.

Jo turned her phone on and tapped Karen's name. She pushed the dictation button. "Karen. Ruby. Concert." She hit enter, and turned security call line on.

The shadow had turned into a dark dressed man.

The little girl, wiggled under the seat her brother sat on.

The man walked down their row. "Come on Ruby. Now. Bring the children."

"No. Liam, you can't have them."

"You said they were my kids. So come on. We need to rebuild our family. Family time matters. Or, at least you say it does." He reached for Ruby.

The lights dimmed even more.

"Darby, Lucy, don't go with him." Ruby stood up.

Lucy cried out. She pulled back and away under the seats.

Jo hit send and stood up. She clicked the dictation button. No idea how much of the conversation had been caught.

"Stay out of this!" Liam pointed at her. The shadow of a handgun made his arm look twice as long.

Jo froze. She'd be no good to anyone, especially Anne, if she were hurt tonight.

Liam grabbed Lucy's leg and pulled her out. He dangled her upside down above the seats.

The little girl's skirt fell down around her screaming face. Her fists beat at the skirt to keep it off her mouth.

Darby stood up and pulled his sister into his arms. "Leave her alone."

Liam grabbed the boy and jerked him down the aisle. "Don't call security. They are my kids. You have no right to them."

Jo hit send. Hopefully security would be waiting at the exit.

Ruby trembled.

Jo touched her shoulder. "Tell me."

"The judge signed the EPO today. He's not supposed to be within 100 yards of me, or my children." Ruby collapsed into the seat. "What do I do?"

With a sister in the senate, it would be tricky. She had to be careful of every step she made, and every confrontation with her children's father.

"Text you sister. Let's leave the audience, and find my cousin. Come on."

Jo pulled Ruby up and away from the few people trickling in.

Behind the scenes, she hurried them to Nani's dressing room. Her cousin had passed them in the hall. She ducked into the closet like room and pulled Ruby in behind her. "Text her now."

She pulled out her own phone. Karen's responses glowed in the darkness. The final one read, "Are YOU safe?"

As scary as it had been, she almost giggled as she responded. "Yes."

A response appeared quickly. "Help on the way. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"They'll be looking for us soon." Jo looked up from the screen.

"Don't let him in here. I'm scared." Ruby cowered in a corner under the jacket Nani kept for the desert chill after the concert.

"It's okay. Karen is sending help."

Ruby looked up. "What will he do to Lucy? And Darby? He hated him."

Jo wanted to hug her and comfort her. That might make it worse. She reached for her hand. "I'm here."

Ruby leaned on her shoulder.

Someone tapped down the hallway. "Jo where are you?"

It wasn't loud. As the voice advanced down the hallway of doors, she recognized another cousin's daughter.

"Here." Jo opened the door.

"Come on. The police are waiting in the staging area."

Jo helped Ruby up.

Ruby staggered along behind her.

Karen met them at the door. "Let me do the talking." Karen led them to chairs positioned around a table.

Chapter 8

Lennie - Ruby Duffy - Year 10

The office was the perfect place to meet. With the sound machine, a desk, his computer, and a few chairs, they'd be comfortable.

Lennie touched the picture frame. Anne's eyes shone as bright as ever in that photo.

Did they still shine on the world?

Could he bring her home with the law Karen was creating with Tarina Owens?

It would be called Ruby's law. Or, it could be named after Anne. Or Sabrina. Or Daisy. Or any number of other named, and unnamed cases, he had worked. As well as hundreds, even thousands, of cases scattered through every field office around the country.

How many had died before the law could even be written?

In the last few years there were thousands of known cases. Through time, and how far back could you go before you stopped counting? More women and children had died from abuse than the number of people who even existed on the planet today.

Of course, it wasn't only women and children that were abused. Women were the most reported, and occasionally made the news. After they died a dreadful death. Men usually survived.

The door opened. Karen walked in.

Case File

Focus: Ruby Duffy, female, age 35
Reporter: Jo Forester, female, age 28
Abuser: Liam Duffy, male, age 33
Abuse type: Kidnapping
Family:
Ex-husband - Liam Duffy, male, age 33
Son - Darby, male, age 6
Daughter - Lucy, female, age 2

Sister - Tarina Owens - Senator, female, age 40

"Any news about Ruby?" Lennie pushed his chair back and sat down.

"No. The children are still missing. We hope to find them. Alive." She sat down across from him and placed a stuffed folder and a laptop on the desk.

"Who was this Liam anyway?"

Karen looked up at him. "Your guess is as good as mine. No one knows where he really came from. They married after a whirlwind relationship. Where he is now, is a mystery for the investigators."

Whatever she knew, or didn't know she was keeping a secret.

He sipped cool water and waited.

A knock at the door announced Chris.

"Come on in and sit down."

Chris sat in the corner.

"You okay?"

"I feel awkward. Always clued in after the fact." His radio made inaudible sounds.

"We need backup."

Chris smiled. "Yeah. Do I have to be backup?"

"Sure you do." Jo stepped in and closed the door. "If we didn't have someone on the outside looking in, we'd all be too emotional over all these events."

"That's what you are for, off driving and working on computers all day." Chris patted the chair next to him.

Jo sat beside him. She refused to look at his face. "I'm too close to them. All of them. I see Anne in every one of their faces."

Chris sighed. "Is Tracie coming?"

"She'll message us when she arrives. Karen what do you have?"

All work and no play. Jo was as focused as himself, or Karen. Chris and Tracie had the ability to laugh. They were the only two who had not been close to Anne. Chris never even met her. Lennie focused on what Karen was saying.

Interview

"Here is what we have so far. It's going to need tweaking. Read it and see what you think."

Lennie checked the sheet. "This isn't the usual legal mumbo jumbo."

"No. This is the plain English version. The version we will use to teach police and case workers. Is it plain enough?"

"Let me read it." Lennie focused on the document.

"Purpose of Ruby's law: This law has been passed to help people break out of the cycle of abuse, and stay out. It is believed that if a person is mentally healthy, physically healthy, has access to health care, and a job that pays a living wage, they are less likely to step back into an abusive situation. If those who abused them have no contact, or ability to contact. This law is to give people a fresh start, with a fresh name if necessary."

"Ruby's law will protect abused people and animals of all ages, races, and creeds. This law allows the abused to be assisted to safe centers around the country, and potentially in neighboring countries. They will remain within the safe walls of the barricaded village until any legal cases are completed. While there, they will receive all physical and mental health care services, as well as vocational services. They will not be held in contempt of child abduction laws, as a lawyer will have contact with the parent and children at all times. They will not face their abuser live in court, if the mental health advocate advises against it. Rather on a life-sized screen, where the abused see no one, except possibly the judge. The accused may not be allowed to see the victim, only to hear the spoken testimony."

"Each rescued person, or family, will have an individual apartment within the center, where they must learn to care for themselves, their apartment and belongings. They will be taught basic home repair, shopping skills, accounting, bank balancing, and budgeting skills. After they are deemed mentally ready, they will be vocationally trained in a local town, if necessary. As soon as all legal proceedings are complete, and any legal changes to name, social security number, and other legal documents are completed; the family will be relocated to a town they would be comfortable

living in, with a job waiting for the wage earner. There will be continued access to mental health services, and local medical insurance coverage until coverage required by the employer takes effect within three months."

"Mostly clear. It'll need a little interpretation, I'm sure."

"Tell me what, and we'll work on it."

"Will abused men be kept with the women and children? What happens to boys who abuse their sisters?"

"All things we need to work out." Karen made notes. "We will start with one location."

"Is this for the state, or the country?" Jo placed her papers on the desk.

"The law is for the nation as a whole. It won't do any good to have state laws regarding this. They will quibble and squabble, if any one state decides they don't want to follow the law." Karen made another note.

Jo reached for her phone. "Tracie will be here in a minute. I'll let her in."

"Is everything okay? It's not like her to be late."

Jo glanced at him. "She had to take Daisy to the doctor. Couldn't be rescheduled."

Lennie stood up and looked out the window.

Tracie's car pulled into the lot and parked in back, near a locked exit.

Jo hurried out to let Tracie in and lock the door behind her.

Tracie followed Jo in. She sat beside Chris and didn't speak.

It would be a long afternoon.

After an hour, or more, of discussing the words, and changing them around to make them easier to understand across the disciplines, Lennie was ready for a break. "Coffee, or tea?"

"Too late in the day for coffee." Karen changed a few more words on her screen.

No one spoke. They were all exhausted.

He stood up to heat the water.

Karen's phone beeped. She checked it. "Tarina Owens checking to see how we are doing. No news about Lucy or Darby."

"I hope nothing bad happens to them." Tracie stood up. "The longer they are missing, the better chance Ruby's law has of passing."

"Ruby's sacrifice. The rest may live. If they are lucky." Chris stretched his arms back and almost bumped into Tracie as she walked by.

"Not exactly. If they do escape now, and Liam lives, he will do this, or worse, again."

"He ignored the EPO." Jo pushed her chair back. "That's what this law is to prevent. Make it impossible for them to ignore the EPO."

"While keeping the abused trapped behind bars, where the abuser should be." Karen made a note. "Wish there was a better way."

"If the justice system moved faster. Instantly fast." Lennie poured the water into the coffee pot. "What flavors do you want? I have peppermint and chamomile?"

"Chamomile please," Jo walked to the door. "I think I'll be right back."

"Coming," Tracie said. "Peppermint please."

"Right behind you. Peppermint tea is fine." Karen closed her laptop.

"They travel in packs." Chris leaned back. "Safer that way. Many end up alone. Then we have to rescue them. Chamomile please."

"True." Lennie prepared the cups. Alone. That, he was. They all were. None of them had seriously dated since Anne disappeared.

Chapter 9

Jo - Place Search - Year 10

"Turn left."

Jo looked left. No road there.

"Missed turn."

"Silly map program. There is no road to the left." Jo let off the gas and slowed to fifty miles an hour.

"Traffic is as bad as Albuquerque." Chris put his paper map down. "Our road won't be on here anyway."

Someone honked behind her.

"Directions said on the left, two miles past the last major intersection." Chris turned the radio down.

It should be here. Her odometer rolled to 1.9 miles.

To the left was a series of trees. One of the landmarks.

"Scrubby trees." Jo slowed to a crawl.

The car behind her honked. The driver then pulled into the oncoming lane, and shot passed her as if she were parked. Scary, at fifty miles an hour.

"If I had my patrol car," Chris said.

"We are outside of your jurisdiction."

"I would at least call in the license plate. And scare them."

"They'd probably drive faster afterwards."

"True. However."

The odometer brushed 2.0 miles.

A dirt lane appeared beyond the trees. Flanked by another row of scrubby brush.

This had to be the place. She turned down the lane.

Chris grabbed his map as the car bounced off the pavement onto the dirt.

At a curve in the trees, the lane turned to concrete. A walled tunnel of rocks greeted them. Difficult to determine at this point if it was natural. This place would be a death trap in a flash flood.

The road circled back upon itself.

How much further?

The rock wall spread out into a large open area.

Jo turned right to stay on the concrete.

An opening occurred.

Another turn.

Too many turns. Dangerous when driven at high speed.

A spiked gate blocked her path.

She stopped the car. Ten minutes early.

In a few minutes, a black car approached the gate. It stopped. Two armed guards stepped out. They flanked the front driver's side. A uniformed person stepped out.

Jo gulped. Not what she expected.

The man walked to the gate. "And you are?"

Jo stepped out of the unfamiliar car. No protection against armed guards. "I have a meeting with someone. I think this is the correct road." If a one vehicle wide concrete line could be called a road.

"Your name?"

He could be anyone. "Your name?" Jo touched her phone on her hip.

The man nodded toward his guards.

They stepped forward.

"Perhaps a few details would suffice. The land is for lease, not for sale, to the best bidder."

That was what Edwine had said in the email. What had been her response? "I am looking for land in a safe location. This looks naturally defended."

"Why should you need naturally defended ground?"

For the safety of the people living within the natural walls.

Chris stepped up beside her, with his hand where his gun would rest if he were in uniform.

"For the safety of the people who will live there."

The man smirked. "I'll show you around."

"Proof of identity first," Chris said.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper.

Chris stepped forward and read it through the gate. "Edwine Griffen. Good. I am Chris Stoney."

"You must be Jo Forester." The man waved to the guards.

They lowered their guns.

"Follow me." He pushed a button and the gate opened silently.

Jo and Chris returned to her rental car.

Jo turned the ignition back and on and drove through the gate. "This is intimidating. Can you imagine being an abuse refugee and being brought through here?"

"They'd want to leave in a hurry. We need the safety. Many may feel as if they have been taken to prison, instead of being let out." Chris gripped the door handle at the next turn.

"Using a temporary prison to escape from a permanent prison. I don't like it. No other way for Karen to work it out legally." Jo stopped beside the other vehicle and waited.

"I'm not sure I've ever felt this way." Chris opened his door. "I didn't think about how the survivors might feel."

"I feel it every single day. I know Kyle is out there somewhere. Watching. Waiting." Jo closed her eyes.

"I don't remember him. I know you all talk about him."

Jo stepped out of the car. "You arrived a few days before he stole Anne and left. You might never have seen him."

"Does the fear ever go away?"

"No. He was a charmer. He could charm his way through any lock. Which is what abusers do. At least some of them."

Edwine walked over to her. "What do you wish to see first?"

"The defense plan. Later, we will view the town plan." Jo clicked the lock on the door.

"It's an old ghost town. Needs work. Mostly complete."

The guards walked toward what looked like tumbled down shacks.

Edwine led them to an area where a few scrubby trees created patchy shade. A table sat under it. "No amenities. We will work on them, if this place will do. Hills surround this valley, and lead down to the gate. The gate is good. We do need to build a fence to keep out the abusers, or any assassins they may send."

Chris grimaced at the word. "I don't like using that word."

Edwine laughed. "It is rarely used for regular people. Perhaps it should be."

Jo touched the map of the location. "Do you have a good aerial view?"

He pulled out a tablet computer and opened the map program.

She took it from him and zoomed around the marked perimeter. A fence this long would be a tremendous cost. As it would anywhere. It would fence the survivors in, and the abusers out.

"It'll be out of sight to those living here?"

"Mostly. When in their village. They will remember it. And have to work to keep it repaired." Edwine took the tablet back.

"Dangerous, letting them near the fence before they are ready." Chris turned to the canyon hill. "You know what it looks like on the map."

Edwine laughed. "Yeah. I noticed that. May be a good selling point. Be reborn out of the hills. What will this center be called?"

"Home Track Village. The first stop on the New Underground Railroad. As long as a rain storm doesn't rush down those hills, and wash us all against the gate in its swirling waters." Jo studied back at the picture one last time. A birth canal with a gate. A place for women, children, and the occasional man, to be reborn without the specters of their abusive pasts hanging over their heads. Would it work? Or, keep the women and children safe in a place they could, or would, never leave?

Chapter 10

Lennie - Janella and Sabrina - Year 10

Lennie turned into his office parking lot.

Karen's car was already there. No sign of Tracie.

"Will they be okay with me being here?" Janella glanced at him.

"Sure." Lennie parked the car. "Two other clients will be here as well."

Janella rolled her eyes. "Not a stinky group therapy session."

"Absolutely not. If anything." Lennie turned to Janella. "We are counting on you to help with the New Underground Railroad village design plans. Ruby will have information about legal matters. Sabrina will keep us all in touch with the real people that matter."

"I agreed to come. I'll help."

"I'm uncomfortable asking. What help do you need getting back into your wheelchair, and into the building? Is there anything you need inside?"

Janella laughed. "I'll manage. Get my chair out, and wheel it around to the passenger door. I manage weight on my feet for transfers, not much longer."

"Good. One reason I wanted to make sure Karen was here. I'm not comfortable helping in some places."

"Thank you for offering." Janella turned away.

Lennie stepped out and pulled Janella's chair out of the back seat.

By the time he rolled it around to her door, she had opened the door and swung her legs out.

"Hope I didn't offend you."

She struggled into the seat. "If you knew me well, it might. You don't. It's reasonable for you to ask. You can't gauge my abilities based on who you may have seen in a wheelchair." Janella settled onto her cushion.

"Some people in wheelchairs can't move or transfer at all. Others are able to walk short distances. It's a wide spectrum. Like most disabilities." She turned the chair toward the building.

Lennie fumbled for his building key. "Be sure and let me know if you need any help."

Janella grumbled as she backed across his toes and slammed the car door shut.

Lennie hobbled to the door. That was unnecessary. Janella was a real spitfire. If more of his clients were like her, he'd be out of a job. That wouldn't matter, if he found Anne.

"Lennie, I'm here." Karen walked up.

Ruby Duffy trailed behind.

Lennie turned the key in the lock. "Should be quiet. You start the coffee. I need to find something." He held the door open to usher the ladies in.

Karen peeked back out. "I'll need the key to your office."

"Oh. Sorry. I'll unlock it." He hurried to unlock the door. Before Janella rolled in, he walked back outside.

He opened the trunk of his car. The blue blanket spread out across the drawing Chris had given him the day before. Lennie lifted the pages carefully. He didn't want to wrinkle or tear them.

Tracie drove into the parking lot and parked beside him. She climbed out of the vehicle and hurried over to his side. Sabrina waited at a distance.

"May I see them?"

"Chris drew them a few nights ago. We will all look at them soon."

Tracie smiled up at him. A little too warmly for his taste. Although he liked her, she would never be Anne. As long as there was hope, he would never test another relationship. Even if he found Anne dead, he wasn't sure he would ever love another person. Tracie would be a good choice if he wanted a relationship.

"I will carry them for you." Tracie held her arms out.

"I'm fine. Go on, Karen is fixing coffee."

She glanced at him, and back at Sabrina. "Come on, we want good seats."

He followed in behind them. Everyone should be inside. Lennie locked the door so no one would surprise them. The push bar would allow them to open it in an emergency. He turned out the hall lights and walked in the sunny haze toward his office door.

Inside, the women laughed and talked as if they had known each other for years.

He stepped inside the door and closed it.

The talking stopped.

"You don't have to be quiet because I am here."

"Time to start our meeting." Karen poured cups of coffee. "Introductions are complete."

Lennie placed the drawings on the desk. It was nearly big enough for everyone to gather around it. "Let's start with a few updates. Sabrina, how is Daisy?"

Sabrina turned away.

"She is not doing well." Tracie poured sugar into her coffee. "Her family is religious, and against abortion, even if it is an incest and child rape case. Legally, not sure we should pursue it. She is only ten years old."

Janella pushed back. "Ten? Do I need to talk to her?"

"Even if we could convince her it is in her best interest, no doctor would do it." Karen handed a cup to Janella.

"Oh some would. They won't admit it."

"Do you know any?" Tracie handed her a napkin.

"Not here. They do exist. It is a fine line. And many who do it make sure the girl will never have another chance to have a baby."

"That's not right either."

"Doesn't have to be right. And I'm sure you understand why."

"It won't happen again. Tracie and Karen will make sure of that." Sabrina pushed her chair back. "Please don't talk about my daughter like I'm not here."

Janella glanced at Tracie.

Tracie's face paled.

"Sorry." Janella pushed her chair around. "Lennie what are we doing here today?"

He touched the pages in front of him.

"Wait." Ruby placed her hands on the desk. "I need to say this. Lucy and Darby are still missing. Tarina has pushed Karen's writing of my bill for the New Underground Railroad Project through. Congress will vote on it next week. My sister is trying."

"Thanks Ruby." Lennie turned his computer on. "We wouldn't be able to do this without your sister's help."

"He's left clues. An investigator even found Lucy's shirt in a hotel pool yesterday." She covered her eyes.

"I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

She looked up. "If Liam hadn't kidnapped our children, we wouldn't be here today. And their might be less hope for Sabrina, Daisy, and even Anne."

"You know about Anne?" Lennie reached for Anne's picture.

"Yes. Karen told me about her, and your plan. If nothing good comes out of this for me, maybe it will prevent another Anne, or Daisy. Maybe there will be hope. For the next mother, sister, boyfriend."

Janella reached over and patted Ruby's hand. "I'm here if you need to talk."

"I'll be okay. How are you going to help?" Ruby smiled through her tears.

"I'm to design the buildings the survivors will live and learn in. Maybe I'll take Brenton and Carina there to live." Janella sipped her coffee.

"What? Take yourself and children to live there? Isn't that a bad idea for them?"

Janella sat her cup down and wheeled back. "No. Society doesn't have room for a wheelchair. Doors, ramps, cars, transportation, shopping, jobs. Doesn't matter what the law says. I'm seen as a nuisance. Even my transportation to the doctor for my daughter last week told me to find someone who could drive to take her, rather than use their time to help me and my children to Carina's first birthday appointment."

"That's not legal." Lennie leaned forward. "Which cab company was it?"

"The medical cab company. And forget going grocery shopping, or even for a walk. The sidewalks are not rollable while caring for two children."

"How will going to the Home Track Village help you?" Ruby leaned forward.

"The women and children will have role models. Many will be hurt, a few in wheelchairs. And up keep of walkways and ramps will assist them by giving them useful skills when they leave."

"We never talked about you staying. Only designing." Lennie touched the plans on the table.

"I decided I want to stay. My neighbor is moving, and I won't have any childcare. The young women will need a strong role model. Designs will need updating as technology changes. As people move in and out. And needs change."

"Are you sure you want to bring your daughter into this?" Karen asked. "She's an infant."

"A smiling infant, a toddler with fresh flowers, and a disabled woman. If we are their first sight upon entering, they will not feel threatened. Within a few days, they will want to share in the strength we carry. A strength stronger than anything this chair, or this building, is made of."

Lennie's toes prickled at the memory of being run over not so long ago. It wasn't a bad idea. Strength in the face of weakness.

Chapter 11

Jo - Ghost Town - Year 10

Tumbled buildings stood where the village was supposed to be. Not even the guards were visible.

It would take hard work to make this ghost town safe for survivors. A dusty road wove between the buildings. Not even a wild animal was in sight. Jo took a photo.

"This building was once a church. Then, as the town failed, it turned into a school. And a few years ago, a band of outlaws found it. There are bullet holes showing the last confrontation with state police." Edwine waved at the building. "Would you like to go in?"

"Um." Roof tiles hung at crazy angles. One window was a mess of shards. The wall with the door hung at a crazy angle. Jo snapped another photo. More work to complete.

"It's safe. My workers have swept the floors, and made notes of needed repairs. There is much work to bring the buildings up to code." Edwine walked up the steps.

"Have people died in there?" Jo touched the railing. Splinters raked across, and into her smooth skin. The rail wiggled like a loose tooth when she bumped it with her toe.

"A few. It was a church. During one of the epidemics, they brought all the sick people here for the doctor to treat. I think half the village died then."

"What epidemic?"

"Who knows? That was back before modern medicine. Probably a flu, or something easily treatable today." Edwin walked up the stairs. "You coming?"

"Sure. Chris, what do you think?" Jo followed him up the steps.

"Doesn't look safe." He paused on the steps.

Edwine pushed the door open. It scratched the wooden boards. Paint flecked off. "No electricity. Mold has been detected in places with bright hand held lights. Rotted boards need replacing."

Light reflected in through the open windows. A bird nest was high up on an open rafter. A small painted window scene was directly behind what must have been a pulpit. No complete furniture

was left. A few sticks of wood that may have been furniture were piled in a corner. Bullet holes in the wall showed where the outlaws had hidden under the window.

Chris walked over to examine the holes in the wall. "Several of these holes are from inside. Must have been like an old western that day." He touched the holes and let out a whistle. "Almost wish I could have seen it."

"This is only one room?" There was no sign of a closet for coats or anything.

"Yeah. I think the school kept a curtain up over in the corner. It was a quiet open community. On to the houses?"

"Sure. How many are there?" Jo glanced back at the bird nest in the windowsill before leaving.

"About five."

"About?" Chris raised his eyebrow.

"Four complete. The fifth, we aren't sure if it was a dismantled house, or a community barn perhaps." The steps creaked under Edwine's feet.

"Wouldn't there have been more?"

"According to records, yes. Later residents recycled the older, abandoned homes for repairs, or firewood."

The first house was in better shape than the church community center. At least the walls, windows, and roof were whole. There was even a wooden bedstead against one wall. The second was similar, with a deteriorated roof.

"Will you have electricity and water here?" Edwine led them to the third house.

"Yes. Solar power would be difficult to tamper with. Running water definitely."

Edwine nodded. "You should apply for an aquifer well permit."

"Where did the inhabitants get water?" Chris asked.

"There was a well. And they gathered rain water. We haven't found the well. Ground penetrating radar might. Or a metal detector, depending on what they filled or covered it with." Edwin stopped in front of the tumbled down structure. "Perhaps it was in there."

A mess of fallen wooden beams. A bush tree grew in the center. Lots of weeds grew around the edges.

"Isn't this part of your ranch?" Jo turned to him and crossed her arms.

"Yes. I own thousands of acres. The village was a curiosity. Now, I'm ready to rent it. I'm never going to have time to fix it up and bring tourists out here. I'm a rancher, and happy to be that. Don't want the trouble of tourists. I prefer my cows, horses, and camels."

"You have camels?" Jo sat on the sandy ground.

"Sure do. Took a few when a circus closed down a few years ago. They are excellent in this environment where the dust blows so much."

Jo touched a few small windblown pebbles. It was an interesting place. With lots of character. Life, death, and survival had always been part of this place. It would be forever.

"How will you feel about people coming and going across your ranch?"

"The roads are there. Be careful of the cows."

"We will be."

He nodded. "The guards are checking out a few of the edges of the ranch area we are giving to you. I will see you to the gate now."

Chris helped her to her feet. "Sir, how soon will you be willing to sell?"

"Next week."

They walked to the vehicles in silence. One week didn't sound like long. They'd have to live in tents until the buildings were brought up to code, and have water and electricity. It would be a year, or more, before the place would be ready to accept refugees. At least Tarina Owens had made sure they'd have enough money to do the project right the first time.

Edwine stopped before the vehicles. "I have to let you know. My sister has been missing for twenty years. I don't think she will be found alive. Maybe you will save someone else's sisters." He walked to his car.

Jo looked at Chris before she followed him to the car she had driven. It seemed as if everyone they met, had a connection.

An hour later, they stopped to eat at a restaurant.

"We can do it." Chris reached out to her hand.

Jo pulled away. "It's going to be difficult. At least one year, if not two."

"Many of those we help will help us."

"I have to build the computers, finish the programing, and have a plan to run everything from." She took a bite of cold thin chili. More like pureed burger with thin tomato sauce swirled through.

"Lennie thinks Janella will be able to do it." Chris took a bite of cold bread smeared with syrup.

"I'll have to meet her. Maybe tomorrow. I need to think tonight."

"What? No driving Nani to a concert tonight?"

"No. No more driving to the concerts. From now on, my brother, Shane, will be doing that. Not me."

"You are going full tilt on this project?"

She nodded. The thin soup wasn't worth trying to finish. Jo put her spoon down. "If you're ready, let's go home. I have work to do."

Chris sighed. "One more bite."

He gulped the last of the bread. And licked the spoon. Then he took her bowl and tilted it draining every last drop into his mouth. He patted his lips with his napkin. "I think you need to relax and have a little fun once in a while."

"When we find her."

He reached across the table. "It's been over a decade. You wouldn't recognize her if you saw her."

"She'd recognize me."

He closed his eyes. "Perhaps. Would she speak up? Would fear, mistrust, or shame, prevent her from speaking to you?"

"I hope not."

"She could have escaped. And never returned home to keep you all safe. She may mistrust your belief in her. Or be too ashamed to come home. We don't know."

"Do you think she is alive? Do you know something?"

Chris shook his head. "Tracie and I talk. We talk about the women who return time and time again. The ones who disappear never to be seen or heard from. The ones who send a letter saying they are safe, with no forwarding, or return address."

"Their families want to know they are safe."

"Your family does. Lennie does. That's not true for everyone. Let's go home. I have to work in the morning."

She grabbed her keys. "So do I. Guess I'll be meeting Janella."

He stood up.

She hurried out the door to the car. Nani had said she'd need a car of her own. Renting wouldn't work anymore. She was right.

Chapter 12

Lennie - Olly Berg - Year 10

The phone buzzed.

"Yes Chris?" Lennie tapped his pencil. The form on the computer wavered.

"Have a case for you. Bringing them in." His radio squeaked and squawked in the background.

"Time?"

"Ten minutes."

"Crime?"

"Medical neglect."

Lennie saved his current document and opened a new one. Enough time to make a new pot of coffee. It would be a long afternoon.

The water percolated. What medical emergency was being ignored? For what religious reason? Could he convince them to do what was in the best interest of the child? Or, was it an adult?

The door down the hall opened.

Footsteps echoed.

A knock at the open door.

"Come in."

A man, and a woman carrying a toddler, stepped into the room.

"Sit down. Tell me what happened."

The hallway door slammed.

Chris appeared in the doorway with a few loose papers. "Here you are." He stepped past the chairs and handed the papers to Lennie. His eyes closed for one second.

It had to be bad. Really bad.

Case File

Focus: Olly Berg, male, age 3

Reporter: Chris Stoney, male, age 28

Abuser: Hector Berg, male, age 30 and Pamila Berg. female, age 25

Abuse type: Medical Neglect
Family:
Father - Hector Berg, male, age 30
Mother - Pamila Berg, female, age 25

"Call me if you need me." Chris turned and left the office.

He would be waiting outside. Unless an emergency run required him to leave.

Interview

Lennie turned to the papers. "You are Hector and Pamila Berg?"

The woman nodded. The infant made a sound as he wiggled on his mother's lap, before he snuggled under her arm. Below his elbow, a bruise the size and shape of a thumb print shown plainly in the light.

"Tell me about Olly."

Pamila glanced at Hector.

"Tell him. Won't make any difference." Hector crossed his arms and leaned back.

Pamila squeezed the toddler.

He snuggled tighter against her.

"He was tired, and had a fever. He lost weight. My mom took him to a doctor against our wishes."

"Against your wishes?" Lennie glanced at the words Chris had written. A match so far.

"No need to take a child to a doctor. Children are good. No harm will come to them." Hector glared at him.

Not a good stance. Did Hector even watch the evening news?

Pamila smiled at the child and rubbed his head. "Nothing should be wrong with him. He'll be sick going to a place like that anyway."

Some truth to that statement. "What did the doctor say?"

"He told my mom to call me right away. He has a kind of juvenile leukemia. He wanted to take my child away and put him in a hospital. I'd never see him again." Pamila covered the boy's head with her own.

"You can visit your son in the hospital while he receives treatment." Lennie typed a few notes into the forms on his computer.

Hector made a strange sound. "No. My son cannot go to a hospital to die. If he dies, he will die at home. We are taking him to a prayer meeting. They will save him."

This was bad. Prayer would not save a child from leukemia. Used along with medical treatment, acceptable. As the only treatment, it wasn't enough.

"Do you understand that your son is a toddler? He is two years old, correct?"

"He's three." Pamila looked up at Lennie. "Small for his age. That's not unusual."

"If he dies, it is something she did." Hector glared at Pamila. "She spoils him beyond what any child should be spoiled."

"Olly doesn't act spoiled. He isn't speaking or moving." Lennie made another note.

"He's tired. The policeman woke him from a nap." Pamila touched his forehead. "I think what mom thought was fever is his natural temperature."

"We know our rights," Hector said. "We have the proper waivers."

"May I see them?"

Hector grunted and reached into his pockets. He pulled out crumpled papers and tossed them across the desk.

Lennie picked them up. Waivers to avoid medical care for a child. Dated ten months ago.

Ten months. They had to be renewed every nine months.

"Do you have a more recent document?"

"Haven't managed to mess with all the paperwork. Too much time and trouble. I can't take the time off of work." Hector grumbled.

Lennie placed the pages on the desk. "Let me check with my legal expert."

"If that policeman hadn't pulled us over after we left the doctor, you would never know. Why did my mother-in-law think that was a good idea?"

"Wait here, we will work something out." Lennie pulled up Karen's number and texted. "What to do if medical waiver is one month out of date?"

A few moments later she responded. "Depends. What needs to be waived."

"Juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia treatment." His fingers twisted while he typed. Spell check didn't like it either, and kept trying to change myelomonocytic to my element.

"What is your legal expert saying?" Hector leaned forward.

"It takes a moment."

The next text was a picture of a whistle. "I'll have to check some things."

Lennie nodded. As if Karen could see that.

"She has to research. There are fine lines."

"May we request another waiver paper if we need to?" Pamila rocked the toddler.

Little Ollie had barely made a sound, or moved, other than to snuggle closer to his mother.

"No. Too late for that."

"You have to understand." Hector began.

Lennie raised his hand. "I understand all too well. In some cases, I agree. We do give too many medications. Many children do suffer needless medical treatments, only to die. Others, spend years suffering, with little enjoyment during that time, whereas they could have had a few last good days with family. It's a fine line."

"You agree with us?" Pamila said. "That's unusual."

"I didn't say that. More, I approve a Hospice approach. Help those who can be helped, and don't force suffering on those whose chances of healthy survival are slim."

"What are Olly's chances?" Pamila leaned toward him.

"What did the doctor say?"

"I don't know. Hector told me to go in there and take him from my mom. They had put a needle in him and took his blood. He needs all of his blood. He was too pale." Pamela closed her eyes.

"She had to take him back from that place. They called the police."

"As they are required to do." Lennie leaned back and waited. Karen would respond soon, one way or another.

"You can't hold us here." Hector prepared to stand up.

"Please stay a few more minutes. Fresh coffee?"

"No thanks. I'll wait five minutes. Not a minute more."

Pamela patted Olly's back.

Best to humor them for the moment. "Tell me how do these prayer meetings work to heal sick children?"

Hector leaned back and crossed his arms. "Sick people go to the front of the group. People pray with them. And if they deserve to be healed, they are healed."

Perhaps prayer in that manner would heal depression, or abandonment issues. Not medical issues.

His phone beeped. Karen had responded. "Precedent isn't good. Fill in the forms. If they want to fight it, they have to update the paperwork. Observation is a required."

"Thanks! Paperwork complete." His response zipped off into the ether to reach Karen faster than spoken words.

"She says you may apply for updated paperwork."

"Good. We may go?" Hector half rose from his chair.

"In a minute. Pamila?"

She glanced up.

"If you need anything, let me know." He handed her his card. "We will be required to do a home check in the next few days."

Hector grunted. "Won't find anything wrong."

"I hope not." And that was the honest truth.

Pamila stood up.

Olly made a sound and struggled to situate his head on her chest.

"Olly, you rest and get better. I want to see you up and playing in a few days."

Pamila looked at him.

He looked back at her. Would she understand? The boy might be dead by morning without medical treatment.

They left his office. Two adults walked down the hall, they sounded more like a single set of lightly plodding footsteps.

He poured the coffee and turned off the coffee pot. What to do? Legally? Morally? And in this case, would the child live? Or would Olly die?

His mind drifted back to that day when Anne told him she was pregnant. He would have helped raise the child. She had never returned. If the child had been his, and grievously ill, he wouldn't want the child to suffer.

Illness was one of those aspects of life that drifted on the horizon between faith and science. Both were needed for a healthy and happy life. What would he choose if he had to choose for him, or one he truly cared for? If that had been Anne and her infant, would he have said anything different?

Yes. He would have argued with her to take the child to the hospital. Even if it was Kyle's child.

He placed the full coffee cup on the desk. After switching off the computer, he walked out of the room.

Chapter 13

Jo - Van - Year 10

The rental car sat in the driveway of Cousin Nani's house. Tiny little thing. Hardly worth a notice. A semi cab was larger. And the bus, so much better for driving.

Jo turned to the bus. It idled, ready for Shane to pick up the high school group to go to another singing.

It was the right choice. Her heart said it was. Her brain said to let the past go. Let someone else fight to keep it from happening again.

Nani walked out of the house. "Jo, you okay?"

Jo nodded. "Reminiscing."

Nani turned her key in the lock. She walked slowly down the steps. "I'll be here. You'll be back in a few hours."

"It's not the same. I miss mom."

"And Anne. I know. That is why you are doing this. When you find her, tell her I need her voice too." Nani brushed Jo's shoulder with her hand. "Now hurry before the dealership closes."

"I don't want a midget car."

"A van might be better for your needs." She walked on to the bus with a slight limp.

A limp Jo hadn't noticed before. Where had it come from? "Nani?"

She turned.

"You okay?"

Nani nodded. "I'm fine. Worried about you."

"You're limping."

Nani smiled. "I tripped over the cat. I really did. Go on now. You'll be late."

Jo walked over to the car.

The bus pulled out of the drive.

She followed. Until the turn off for the car rental place.

The building was chilly. The attendant sat in front of a fan, fanning herself with a magazine. "May I help you?"

Jo handed her the keys. "Turning it in."

The woman sighed and fanned faster. "These hot flashes are more than I can stand in this weather."

"It's only 52 degrees."

The woman glared at her. "Feels like 110. I'll check the car tonight, after it cools off."

Jo smiled. "Have a good day."

She hurried out the door and to the car lot next door. It was tiny. There wasn't much need for new cars here in town. They sold about twenty a year, mostly to high school graduates. She had skipped that expense. Until now.

The door opened with a jingle of bells.

A bald man stepped up to the counter. He was vaguely familiar. A father of one of her classmates from over a decade ago.

"May I help you?"

"I need a reliable vehicle. I don't want a midget car. What do you have in stock?"

"Depends on when you need it. I have two small cars here. The rest of my vehicles are at the lot in Albuquerque."

"That isn't much stock."

He laughed and put his arms on the counter. "My sons do most of the selling there. I tend to have ten or so at the end of the school year. A shipment of four coming in tomorrow for Christmas."

Jo laughed. "Not much need here."

"No. People only buy one every ten years or so. Many go to town to for a brand new one." He leaned forward. "What do you need? I will find it."

"I'm used to driving Cousin Nani's bus."

"Bigger is better?"

She nodded. "A good-sized van."

"Color?"

Color. Did that matter? "White."

"As long as you aren't stalking children, I will have one delivered tomorrow."

If he knew how accurate that statement was. Stalking wasn't quite the right word. Safety for the adults and children she needed to protect. "I'd appreciate it."

"Can you get home?"

She looked up at him.

The alarm must have shown in her face. He stepped back. "I don't mean anything by it."

"Lennie will give me a ride home. I'll be back late tomorrow."

She walked out. The helpful statement shouldn't bother her. If Lennie had offered her a ride home, she'd be fine with it. Even Chris wouldn't have bothered her. Something had spooked her. A memory of Kyle touching her bottom as she passed caused her to quiver on the sidewalk.

Someone laughed.

She glanced up.

Two teens walked ahead of her, holding something between them. They were facing forward, so shouldn't have seen her.

She straightened up and marched to Lennie's office.

He locked the door as she approached.

"Lennie."

"Yes."

"I need to go meet Janella."

His eyes locked onto hers. "You don't look ready to meet such a strong-willed person. As strong-willed as you are, if not more so."

"Is it that obvious?"

He waved toward his car. "Yes. Let's have coffee and talk, if you want to."

She nodded. Stalling. She needed her full senses about her before she spoke to Janella.

At the coffee shop, she stared at the steaming cup. No words had been spoken beyond ordering simple coffees. She rubbed her finger around the rim of the cup. A broken chip snagged her finger.

"It's a waking nightmare. Tell me about Janella."

Lennie looked at her. "She, her son, and her infant daughter, will be a welcome addition to our team." He continued talking.

She wasn't listening. What was it about that man that bothered her? Who was he?

A hand reached into her field of view.

She jumped.

It was Lennie. The look on his face showed he knew something was bothering her.

"Do I need to call Tracie? Or Chris?"

"No." A passerby outside the window drew Jo's attention.

"What happened?"

"I returned the rental and walked next door to the car lot. Something about the owner disturbed me is all."

Lennie nodded. "You know who he is?"

"No."

His eyes closed. "He is Kyle's father."

"I didn't know any of the family still lived here."

"Chris ran his brothers out of town. Unintentionally, of course. He hounded them looking for information about Kyle and Anne."

"Does his father know where they are?"

"No. Chris used every legal method to track his movements for years. With his dad's permission, we even monitored phone calls, mail, and email. His dad stays, hoping they come back here."

Jo clutched the cup and sloshed hot coffee on her hand.

Lennie nodded. "I am beginning to wonder if they are even alive. Anywhere."

Kyle's father could be an asset, or a liability.

"Anne has to be alive. Aunt Mary hangs on hoping she comes home. Almost as much as you do."

"And you. Are you sure you are up to meeting Janella?"

"Yes. When my coffee cools." The swirling liquid mesmerized Jo.

Chapter 14

Lennie - Jo and Janella - Year 10

Jo's face had warmed back to its usual light pink glow. Similar to, and so different from Anne's. Maybe it was the red hair that framed Jo's face that made it so different. Anne's hair had been straight and black, like her distant ancestors from the region.

Jo favored her Irish ancestors in more ways than one. Something he had come to know, and trust, had been scared and scarred by the same man who had stolen Anne. And now, that man's father had unintentionally scared Jo.

Jo swallowed the last of her coffee. "Let's go."

Her voice was almost right. Not quite.

"I want to take Janella something. I'll run into the grocery store for a minute."

"I need to text Nani anyway."

A few minutes later, Lennie parked the car in front of the small grocery store. Janella could use so much. She wouldn't take gifts. She might see that something was bothering Jo. He picked out a small yellow cake and a bottle of soda for a celebration.

Back at the car, he placed the bag in the back seat. "Text sent?"

"Sent. My brother is taking my place. Too easy I might add. Of course, he drives for the truck company too."

"Good. You'll be better able to help us."

"I intend to. That's why Janella and I need to work together."

Lennie parked in front of Janella's house. "Ready?"

"Definitely. Lots of work to do."

Janella's son, Brenton, opened the door. "Mom said it was you."

"She did?"

He pointed to a screen on the wall. A picture of him and Jo mirrored their steps on the porch.

"At least you aren't opening the door to strangers." Lennie stepped in followed by Jo.

"No way. Mom said she'd be back in a minute."

"I can't stay long. I brought refreshments for a party. I have to go check on another family."

"I wish you'd stay." Brenton pouted.

The boy did need a father figure in his life. "Soon. Not today."

"I'll take the bag," Jo said.

"Thanks." He handed her the bag. "Text me if you need me. I won't be far away."

She nodded.

Janella rolled into the room with baby Carina on her lap. "Leaving?"

"I brought Jo. She needs to talk. Work talk. I wouldn't understand most of what you two will talk about. I'm more a people person. Not technical, or computer smart."

Janella glanced at Jo. Her face softened. "As long as you are on call."

"I am."

"May I come with you?" Brenton asked.

An outing would be good for the boy. Not this one. "Not today. I'm going to check on a little boy about your sister's age. He was sick yesterday."

Janella turned her chair back around in the kitchen doorway. "Not contagious I hope."

"Oh no. Not contagious. Brenton, I'll take you sometime, if your mother agrees. Think about where you would like to go."

"The zoo. Take mom and sissy too."

He laughed. "Sounds fun." And it did.

He left and drove to the Olly Berg home. When he parked, he looked around the yard and street. Good to know all the exits. The most dangerous aspect of many home visits was an angry cat. Or, occasionally, a snippy dog. Often, it was the adults he had to watch out for. Many carried guns or knives.

Rescue

This house looked normal from the outside. Grass grew in a few patches along the walkway. Flowers under windows. Windows were whole, no broken panes.

He walked up to the door and knocked.

Hector opened the door. "Hello Mr. Darendale. We don't need your help."

"I am required to check on Ollie. How is he today?"

Pamila stepped into view. Her shoulders slunk low. Her face pale and drawn.

"He is better." Hector moved to block Lennie's view of Pamila.

"May I see him?"

Hector did not move.

"I will obtain a warrant if necessary."

The man glared at him, then tilted his head toward his wife. "You may step in far enough to close the door behind you. No further."

Lennie stepped in. The room was nearly empty. One couch. A tiny table. No clothes. No toys. No sign that anyone lived in this room.

Pamila returned with Ollie in her arms.

Ollie lay limp and red faced against her side.

"His fever went up. It broke a few hours ago." She walked up to Lennie.

Lennie touched the little boy's cheek. The fever was there, barely contained. He wouldn't make it without medical care. That much was obvious.

Hector paced the empty room. "We took him to the prayer meeting."

"And?"

The man turned to Lennie. "They turned him away because of the fever. They said he needed care they couldn't provide."

"What did you do?"

"One of the men prayed for him. If I promised to take him to the hospital. He will die now." Hector stalked out of the room.

Pamila's eyes filled with tears. "We took him back to the hospital. They took him away for a while. When they brought him back, his fever had broken. They said he would need to go every few days for a few months. It'll be a long death. Not a quick one."

Ollie turned to look at Lennie.

"He should be fine if you take him for treatments."

Pamila snuggled her son closer. "Hospitals are cold places. Not a place to live. A place to die."

Lennie reached out to Ollie. "Ollie. You will live. In fact, I need you alive. There is a boy, a little older than you who needs a good friend. Promise me, you will get well and be his friend?"

Ollie closed his eyes and snuggled against his mother.

The boy might live, if his parents didn't give up on him.

"Does he have any toys?"

"He has a stuffed bear. And a few blocks." Pamila stared at the door Hector had disappeared through.

"That isn't much. Would you like more toys for him?"

"No. He has plenty." Her eyes told a different story.

Janella would be a good friend for Pamila. And maybe able to rescue her and Ollie from Hector. It would take time. A long time. Time wasn't something they had much of.

"I'll check back in a few days. Take care." Lennie stepped out of the house. His words would have to be consciously chosen when Hector was there. Better to have Janella, or even Tracie, say the words that needed to be said. It was Tracie's job, if only she had more time.

The short drive back to Janella's was filled with doubt and fears for the little boy's life. And that of Pamila. Would she even want to leave?

At Janella's, Brenton ran out the door, full of joy to see him.

Lennie accepted the boy's hand. They walked up the walkway to the house.

Inside, Jo and Janella discussed computer talk. Both fully animated.

"I'll get my blocks." Brenton ran down the hall and into a room. He returned, lugging a large bag full of blocks which he dumped on the floor. "Build?"

Lennie laughed. "Sure. Let me text Chris and tell him I won't be meeting him and Tracie for dinner." The boy needed a friend. His own age. That would take time. Tonight, a father figure would help. He tapped the text out before he sat down on the floor beside the boy.

"You have to make the bottom bigger, so the top stays on." Brenton moved the pieces expertly. "Mom tells me how to build. It's fun."

Lennie picked a few pieces and matched them up. "Do colors matter?"

"Not here. Only size."

This little boy would do well with his mom to teach him.

Part 2

Home Track Village

Chapter 15

Jo - Settling In - Year 12

The road wound its way through the open countryside. So much hope rested in the next few days.

"Are you ready?" Jo asked.

"As ready as I will be." Janella flipped the coloring book pages before handing it to Carina. "It will be an adjustment. For Carina and Brenton."

"I'm ready to explore!" Brenton hopped in his seat.

"I bet you are. You'll have to wait until Lennie comes for that. Or Chris." Jo wound around the next curve.

"Can't you take me?"

"I've work to do."

"Everyone works all the time. Don't forget to play." Brenton turned back to his coloring book.

"Hold on for the curves." She turned off onto the dirt road. Play. Perhaps that was part of it. Something the little boy had said so many times. Adults forgot to enjoy a few moments a day. All too worried about the future, to be there in the present.

Edwine Griffen waited for them at the gate. "Last time I'll open the gate for you. Here are the keys."

Jo took the keys. Five keys.

"Two for the gate. One for the old church. One for the building you designed, and one for the house. Your other buildings don't have locks. You said you would supply them."

"Are there duplicate keys?"

"No. Per your instructions."

Locks could be changed around. "Will you be on the property anymore?"

"No. Your fence is almost complete. One more corner, and it should be complete today. The workers are working outside the fenced in area."

"Thanks."

"Good luck! My horse will take me back to the ranch." He untied a tall horse. Within minutes, he had ridden out of sight around the last curve.

Jo drove the white box van in through the gate.

After locking it tight, she returned to drive to the village.

"We'll need a gate person." Jo adjusted the seatbelt.

"Automatic would work."

"Too slow. Power outages, or other problems could make it dangerous."

"How about a combination?" Janella swayed with the next curve.

"A good idea. We will work on implementing it soon." Jo parked in front of the original church building. It had been retrofitted and would be the perfect location for their command base.

"When will Olly be here?" Brenton struggled out of his seat.

"In a few hours." Janella pushed the door open and touched the button to let the ramp down. "Guess you are ready to play?"

"Yes."

"Run on the dirt track for a few minutes, then you need to come inside. Soon there will be many people here, and you will be able to play more."

Carina slept in her seat.

Jo picked her up and carried her out.

Janella pushed her chair up the ramp to the building. She grunted from the effort.

"You could have an electric chair."

"I hope to walk in the next year. Anyway, I need part of my body to be strong."

Jo placed sleeping Carina on Janella's lap before she unlocked the door. "You are stronger than you realize."

"I wish." She rolled across the open doorway. Her wheelchair jammed against the metal threshold. Janella jerked backwards and slammed her chair and toddler over it.

Carina woke and whimpered.

Janella rubbed her head. "You want to go play with your brother?"

She nodded, slid off the wheelchair, and ran out the door.

"They act like they've been here for months."

"We have visited several times the last few weeks. They know their way around." Janella turned and watched them run around the van. "Do you mind staying here a few minutes? I'm going to turn on the computers."

"And the coffee pot. Go ahead."

"Wish I could do more." Janella turned and rolled away. She stopped at the next door. She tried to overtop the threshold.

"Do we need to take them out?"

"They are supposed to help. It would damage the floors to take them out." Janella propelled herself over it into the now main room that housed the computers.

"It will damage your arms if we don't."

"I'll turn everything on. The builders meant well. They forgot about life. Not just me. Even mothers with strollers won't be able to maneuver over that hump easy."

Brenton and Carina ran up the steps and brushed past her.

The joys of youth. Jo closed the door.

Carina picked up a doll on the bench. "Tools?"

"Which ones?" Brenton had the cabinet door open.

"Build."

He pulled out a child's tool set and handed it to his sister. "I'll build with blocks."

"Loose boards." Carina carried the doll and pounded at boards in the walls with the toy hammer.

Jo went into the buzzing computer room. "You encourage them."

"I want them to succeed. Like I almost did."

"You did. You re-designed this building, and more buildings here." Jo grabbed a coffee cup.

"You see how they workers cut corners. They were supposed to install the ramps flush. They didn't listen."

"For the next few buildings, you'll be here for them to ask questions."

Janella laughed. "I'll be their worst nightmare. Watching every step they take."

Jo laughed. Coding would take time. Most of the maps were downloaded and easy to reach. Now, it was a matter of figuring out the backups if there was a power or internet failure.

"I'm going to test the virtual reality goggles."

"I'll put in more orders for things we need here. Deliveries will be slow with all those curves." Janella sifted through screens on her computer.

The goggles would hide the sights and sounds around her. And allow her to see the roads in the map programs. More coding needed doing. Little bits and pieces. Real time for the scenery. People, vehicles, and animals could hide in the bushes. The goggles couldn't be hooked up to every potential rescue vehicle. The vehicle used would be dependent on the survivor being rescued. There needed to be multiple real time feeds, especially if they were being chased by abusers. Without cameras every ten feet across the country, that would be difficult. A perplexing problem. The program was designed to save lives, not increase the risk of danger.

Chapter 16

Lennie - Fern Hargin - Year 12

Coffee percolated in a new coffee pot next to Anne's picture. The second since this job began. The seventh since he began college.

Lennie clicked the button to call Ruby. After a little more than seventeen months, even that had become routine. Ruby had essentially become another of his clients. She was by far the most influential of them all. Without her help, they wouldn't have the Underground Railroad Village Project.

Every time he called, he hoped the answer would change.

"Hello?" Ruby answered.

"Any news?"

The coffee pot gurgled to announce the pot was full.

"No. Chris is researching something. Not sure what. He was here yesterday. I don't think there are any questions I haven't answered already. If we don't find Lucy soon, she won't remember me. Darby might. I'm afraid he took them out of the country. He had to have, as long as it's been."

"Not necessarily. If he changed their names, they could be hidden anywhere."

"I'd agree, if they hadn't been on the news so much. Everyone has to have seen them."

Lennie tapped his pencil. "Don't be so sure. The demographic that watches broadcast news these days is tiny. Mostly the elderly and disabled who don't leave home much. Those who are out and about and may have seen them, tend to either hear the news on the radio while distractedly driving, or read it online. Others stream it, though pictures don't come through as well."

Ruby sighed. "I'm grasping at straws, aren't I? Trying to reach those who would help through a means they don't even use anymore. When did you last watch the news on TV?"

Good question. "A month after Anne was kidnapped. I couldn't handle the reports anymore. That's been fourteen years and nine months."

"Anything you recommend?"

"No. If Chris is there, we will wait until I hear from him." Lennie's phone buzzed with an incoming call. "Speaking of which. I'll call you back soon."

"Okay." Ruby ended the call.

She was trying to hold it together. He knew, that in the background, when no one was looking, she was as heartbroken as he was. Too many valued days with her children she had missed. She would never have those days back.

"Yes, Chris."

"Another medical emergency for you."

"Intentional or unintentional?"

"A mother with epilepsy dropped her infant. She shouldn't have picked her up."

"Did the infant need changing?"

"Who knows."

"The mother has to take care of her child."

"With a known medical condition, like that, she shouldn't pick her up, or put the child in danger."

"We are all one chemical, one accident, one problem away from an unknown medical condition." Lennie pulled up a new case record on his screen.

"She knew the risk."

"We all know the risk. Would you tell Janella she couldn't have changed her daughter? You think she couldn't have lost hold of a squirming infant, and had her drop between her legs and catch in the wheelchair feet?" The screen flickered to the name of the reporting files.

"You're right. I don't like these cases. They hit home too hard. Especially since Zadema is helping Daisy raise her daughter. Those infants are so fragile. More fragile than anything I ever imagined."

"What are the names? Are you bringing them here?"

"No. Valaranda Hargin dropped her daughter, Fern Hargin at 5 am this morning. Fern has been flown to Children's Hospital in Albuquerque with a skull fracture. Valaranda is waiting at home on her mother to arrive from Carlsbad, to drive her to Children's Hospital."

"How long?"

"An hour at most. Here is the address."

Case File

Focus: Fern Hargin, female, age 22
Reporter: Chris Stoney, male,30
Abuser: Fern Hargin, female, age 22
Abuse type: Medical Neglect due to Epilepsy
Family:
Daughter - Valaranda Hargin, female, age 1
Mother - female, age 50

Lennie jotted down the address. He grabbed the forms, and ran to his car. It wasn't much time, and the laptop would be far too slow and unreliable to fill in the forms on location. This new mother needed to reach her hospitalized daughter as soon as possible. She needed medical care herself.

Interview

Within moments he was at the tiny trailer home of Valaranda Hargin. He knocked on the door. "Hi. I am Lennie Darendale."

A thin woman answered the door. Her cheeks were soaked from tears, and dried blood was on the hem of her nightdress. "They said you would come. Come in. It's messy."

Lennie touched her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The woman looked down at the floor. "I dropped my daughter. I'll never be okay. It was my fault."

"Yes you will. Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"Already been. When I dropped Fern, I fell, and it triggered my emergency button. The paramedics found us covered in blood."

That must have been a horrid sight to see.

"Luckily, they know my history. It's the first seizure I've had since Fern was born." She walked into the living area.

A chair was the only furniture. Blankets were strewn around for the baby.

"I was packing for the hospital. There is where Fern fell." Valaranda pointed to a maroon blanket ringed in baby blue.

He picked it up. It wasn't a maroon blanket. It was a baby blue blanket, covered in dried blood.

"May I help you clean up?"

She glanced at him. "It needs to soak. I don't know if I can look at it. I was going to leave it for mom."

"No need. Go pack. I'll put it to soak in your washing machine. We will talk while you pack, if you don't mind."

She nodded and walked down the hall with hands at her sides, and head drooped.

The washing machine was an old one. Lennie turned the knob and water sprang upward into his face. He shut the lid down and turned it off. After the water stopped, he opened it back up. Lennie placed all the blankets in and closed the lid before restarting the machine.

Valaranda sat on a small bed surrounded by clothes. "I've no idea how long I may be there. Or even if Fern will live." Her hands dropped the tiny yellow shirt she held.

Lennie sat the clipboard on the bed. Tracie was much better with this aspect of the job. "I'd plan for three days. Clothes can be washed there."

"Am I, like he said, not able to care for my daughter?"

Oh no. Had Chris said that to her face? "Who said that?"

"The policeman at the hospital who drove me home. He said I had no business raising an infant alone. I'd kill her."

"Not intentionally."

"No. I fell on top of her. My arm was across her throat. I don't remember it, of course."

"It was an accident. Any parent could trip, the baby tumble out of their arms, and then them land on top of the baby."

Valaranda Hargin wiped her eyes. "Mom didn't want me to stay here. I had a job. And don't where she lives."

"Do you have a job?"

She nodded. "As long as I don't lose it with being gone to care for Fern."

"Would your mom come here?"

"No. Her job is there."

Rescue

"We will find a way to keep you here. You said you have an alert?"

"Yes. It's what saved us."

"I have an idea. I will find a school-aged child who will live with you and help you. Would that be good?"

She nodded.

"Now let's help you pack."

Release

Who to choose? Daisy would be perfect, if her brother and father didn't live a few blocks away. There had to be thousands of women like Daisy all across the country. Maybe a trade amendment could be added to Ruby's Law. Daisy would go somewhere safe, and someone in her predicament would come here. They'd both be safe, and actively participate in their new community.

Chapter 17

Jo - Ashley Chardell - Year 13

The mall parking lot was crowded.

Jo maneuvered the van into a space well away from the traffic. Too many Phoenix shoppers were looking for last minute Easter deals. The perfect time and place to meet with her client for the day.

She picked up the paper and read it. This Ashley was meeting her in public. Her legal initials were AC. They'd never show up on an official Railroad document. Too much risk of being discovered.

The encrypted document didn't share much the causal viewer would recognize.

AC FC FF mid rh ge cv. If she hadn't made up the code herself, she'd never know it said: Ashley Chardell, Food Court, Fruit Food, mid-morning, red hair, green eyes, conservative dress.

She crumpled the note and tucked it into her pocket.

Case File

Focus: Ashley Chardell, female, age 22
Reporter: Ashley Chardell, female, age 22
Abuser: Pastor Stork, male, age 48
Abuse type: Religious
Family:
Husband- Neil Chardell, male, age 21
Unborn Child

A few minutes later, she had joined the crowd filing into the main doors of the mall. Shoppers spread out in every direction.

A man with a cane shuffled toward the food court.

Jo followed, glancing at the shops opening along the way.

A few busy shoppers raced in behind her and almost plowed the man down.

She reached out and kept him from falling.

He glanced up at her. "Thanks." He tapped his cane on down the hallway.

So much for shoppers sharing words in a busy retail season.

The Fruit Food stand was near one of the exits. A little too near for her comfort. Anyone could sneak in and overhear their conversation.

A woman sat alone at a table.

Jo walked toward her.

That could be her. She had long wavy brown hair, and had a bag with a brand name on the outside at her feet.

A man sat a few tables further down.

Maybe she had arrived before Ashley.

A few tables away from the others would be a good place to sit and wait.

The man glared at her as if she shouldn't be there.

She sat alone.

He stood up and huffed off on an errand of his own.

People walked by outside the marked table area. A toddler let go of a woman's hand and stopped to stare at her. A few teens ran down the corridor and knocked the toddler down.

Interview

Before she could stand, a voice said, "Hi."

Jo looked up. A young, conservatively dressed young woman with red hair and green eyes stared back at her.

"Are you Jo?"

She nodded and waved to the empty metal chair beside her.

The woman sat down. "You know my name. I'm here to share my story. Help me make a decision." She placed her elbows on the table and her head into her hands.

"I don't know what to do. I followed Pastor Stork's advice."

Would reaching out physically do more harm than good? Karen had said something about this Ashley Chardell. A complex case, involving more than one person. Of course, most did, in reality.

She scooted her chair closer.

The woman mumbled.

Jo leaned closer.

"Pastor Stork said." She covered her mouth and glanced around at the rushing shoppers.

"Do you want something to drink?" Drinks on the table would look more natural.

Ashley closed her eyes before she spoke. "He said, if I had a baby, my husband would stop staying out all night."

Jo closed her eyes. That never worked. Hard to believe religious people continued to spout such falsehoods.

"Neil left two days ago, I haven't seen or heard from him since."

"Did you follow the pastor's advice?"

Ashley nodded. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she stared at Jo. "Now, I'm pregnant, Easter is almost here, and my husband disappeared. I could have moved and had a good job. I stayed instead. He said I had to. I married Neil years ago."

"May I give you a hug?"

She nodded.

Jo reached out to gently hug the crying woman. She was in a mess. It didn't sound like her life was in danger. Only her marriage. And her belief in her religion.

"Emotional manipulation is a reason to call us. I have to ask, has anyone hurt you physically?" Jo watched the woman's face.

"No. Neil leaves me alone most of the time. He's seldom home. Our first two years together were wonderful. I don't know what happened."

"You are physically safe at home?"

She nodded.

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go somewhere where there are people. Where Pastor Stork can't find me, and preach to me that I must be a sinner, or my husband would be with me. My baby needs a healthy place to grow up."

She had taken that first step. Was she ready to take the next one?

"Have you known Pastor Stork long?" Jo leaned back and glanced around at the passersby. No one seemed to be listening.

"All my life. I attempted to leave the church a few years ago. Then, the economy failed. I lost my job. The only ones who would help me were the church. On the condition that I rejoin." The woman shuddered. "I fell back into the trap, and tried to drag Neil along. Alienating him in the process."

Strong words. True words. "Where do you think Neil is?"

"I don't know. We've hardly spoke in the last two months. Since the baby was conceived. When I told him two days ago, he turned away. I haven't seen, or heard from him since."

"You want a fresh start. It won't be easy."

"I know."

"I'll give you an address to meet us in two days. At 2 pm." Jo scribbled an address in the town nearest the hidden valley.

Ashley sighed. "I'll be there." Her hands shook as she accepted the paper. She pushed her chair in and walked away.

Jo waited. What for, she wasn't sure.

The man she had seen earlier shuffled up and sat in the seat Ashley had vacated. "You shouldn't encourage her."

"Why not?" Jo leaned a little closer.

"She has waited almost too long to have a baby. Without children, she has no future."

"Her future is hers to choose."

The man glanced up at her. "Your generation is neglecting the future. You don't want a future. The future we fought for."

"We do want a future. A bright future for everyone."

"Without babies, there will be no future."

"The babies need to be wanted. And cared for. Without that, there is no hope for those who survive. Someday, if the population shrinks enough, maybe they will all be wanted."

The old man laughed. "By then, there won't be enough people to create a new generation."

"There will be. Far more than you realize. No woman should be forced to have a baby; any more than a man should feel forced to do his part in the birth of a child. If children are more wanted, there will be far less abuse of women and children."

"Unlikely. I have to encourage them to do their duty."

Jo stood up and pushed her chair in. "It is my duty to help them live. And give them the opportunity to make their own choices." She walked to the mall doors without looking back.

Chapter 18

Lennie - Linda River and Daisy Jarvis - Year 13

The coffee pot gurgled.

The computer flickered. The case file shimmered, disappeared, and the picture of Anne covered the screen.

Was the computer wearing out?

Or Anne's ghost not wanting Lennie to focus on the most recent case.

A few clicks and the case was retrieved. He saved it this time. After closing it correctly, Anne's picture shone before his eyes.

This next case. Linda. The story would haunt him almost as much as Anne. Of course, Anne's mother would never be as cruel as Linda's mother.

Case File

Focus: Linda River, female, age 38
Reporter: Tracie Baxter, female, age 31
Abuser: Mother and system
Abuse type: Abandonment
Family:
Mother - female, Kristel River, age 60
Newborn Son, male, age 1 week

Interview

A knock at the door pulled him out of his memories.

Tracie stood half in his office.

Daisy held a toddler a few steps behind her.

"Come in."

Tracie touched Daisy's arm and directed her to a chair close to Anne's picture. She closed the door behind her before sitting down. "What's this case about?"

Lennie popped his fingers and leaned back. The mental picture of Linda in a hospital bed with an infant at her side blocked out all thoughts for a moment.

"Client LR has cancer. Doctors induced labor to begin chemotherapy. Her chances of survival are dim."

"And the child?" Tracie glanced at Daisy before leaning forward.

"Boy. Two weeks early."

"Why did you call me. Doesn't she have family who can raise the child?"

"No. The orphan's father is dead. The mother's mother." How could she be so cruel?

"Yes." Tracie leaned closer.

"She wanted her daughter to never see the child. As soon as the word cancer was mentioned, it was as if her only grandchild had died. She is insisting that Linda give the child away."

"Don't make her." Daisy mumbled a few more words and quietened her toddler. "She'd regret it."

Daisy would be an asset. "The grandmother has already told child protective services to come for the boy. Linda refused. The scene in the hospital was ugly."

"She needs her baby! She's sick." Daisy leaned forward. "I need my baby. Can I go see her?"

Lennie smiled. This young girl, far too young to be a mother, might be exactly what the doctor ordered for Linda. And her mother. "It won't be easy to see her in a hospital room. And I don't know if her mother will be there or not. The cancer diagnosis is bad enough. She can't leave her hospital room."

"You'd have to wear a mask to protect her from any germs. Your baby may have to go to the nursery while we are there."

Daisy's frightened eyes looked from one to the other, and back at her daughter. "I want her back."

"Of course." Tracie held out her hand. "In fact, if you'd like one of the other women to go with us, they will babysit at the nurse's station if that would make you more comfortable."

Daisy nodded and held the baby closer, until she squeaked. She released her hold enough that the toddler giggled.

She did need help. Tracie was right about that. Having someone to help would make it easier on her to disconnect a healthy amount from her own baby.

"We will leave in about twenty minutes then."

"Give me the baby, and go to the restroom." Tracie held out her arms.

Daisy handed the squirmy toddler to Tracie and walked out of the room. The door down the hall to the restroom closed.

"You were right."

Tracie wiggled her fingers until the baby laughed. "I can't imagine being in her place. Nurses in the hospital attempted to take her baby from her. Without you, she would have lost her. And herself."

The door down the hallway slammed shut.

Daisy walked back into the office and took her baby from Tracie. "I'm ready now. I know who I want to go with us."

"Why don't you go pick her up? I'll close up here and pick you up in a few minutes." Lennie sipped his coffee.

"Good idea." Tracie led the way out of the office.

Even empty, echoes of the lives of those who entered, remained in his office. So many lives. Decisions that rested heavy on his shoulders. Had he made the right decisions? Even if they were the correct decision for the client in front of him, what about the others?

Daisy was the perfect example. Keeping her baby was the correct decision for her. For now. What about the baby? Was it the right decision for him? Would he ever know?

Did Linda's mother grieve, and think she was making the best decision for the child? Did she too have underlying health problems, and would be unable to raise the infant if Linda died?

His phone beeped.

Tracie, Daisy, and Daisy's friend waited on him. He left the room and locked the door behind him. The questions remained there. He had to have the answers when he met Linda.

Rescue

Lennie followed Daisy and Tracie into the stark white hospital room.

Linda River's complexion matched the sheets around her. Even the blanket was pale and lifeless. No color anywhere. No flowers to be seen.

Daisy walked up to her. "Where is your baby?"

Linda opened her eyes. "They took him. He'll be okay. They'll bring him back. They promised."

Daisy touched the woman's hand. "You need him. He needs you. Get better. Battle the cancer."

The woman smiled. "I will. With a strong girl like you to help me."

Daisy flinched. "I brought my two-year-old daughter with me. I can't bring her in your room. I can't imagine life without her. Even if she does remind me of times I'd rather forget."

Linda Rivers blinked. "You have a daughter?"

"Yes. I know how important your son is. Don't give him up. We will care for him until you are better."

"Who helps you?"

Daisy sat beside the woman. "I live in Home Track Village. There are many women and children there. We could take your son until you are strong enough to join us, and help raise him."

Linda glanced up at Lennie. "Is this true?"

Lennie nodded. "We'd take your son and you. Help you both. Do you know why your mother doesn't want your son to be part of your life?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm an embarrassment. My husband died before we found out I was pregnant. Then, I developed cancer. Mom says I waited too long to have a baby. She's almost sixty now, and can't take care of him. I know she has his best interests at heart."

"What about your interests?" Daisy squeezed her hand.

"Mine? She expects me to be dead in six months. Then, the child will have lived in the hospital with me, and will have missed his most formative six months. She won't take care of him. I waited too many years."

"You'll be there for him. We'll see to that." Daisy bounced up. "Call for your baby. I want to see him."

A few minutes later, the nurse brought in a tiny bundle, and laid the boy in Daisy's arms.

Linda smiled at her. She reached out to touch the boy's forehead. "You be good for this young woman."

"He can't go with us today." Lennie sat in the other chair. "You'll have to tell me more of your story before we complete the approval process."

"You will help him?"

"Certainly."

Release

Linda's recovery was slow. The chemotherapy caused massive injury. Even her mind slowed. One day, six months later, she had even forgotten about her baby boy.

The doctor gave up on her.

Daisy never did. "Bring her here. The fresh air will do her good."

At Home Track Village, Linda River held her baby. His smile brought tears to her eyes. His fists waved in her face, and brought her attention outside herself.

It took another six months for Linda to begin to recover. Sunshine, flowers, her son, and Daisy were the main instruments which sped her recovery.

Chapter 19

Jo - Mabel Viola and Ashley Chardell - Year 13

Jo pulled into the gas station in Springerville to wait for Ashley Chardell. She was at least ten minutes early.

The lot behind the gas station had one of those electric transfer boxes like the one across from her high school. Almost like home.

Had Anne found a place like home where she felt safe? Would she ever return?

A car pulled in behind her.

Ashely stepped out of the driver's side. "Jo. I need your help."

Maybe she had changed her mind, and decided not to leave her world behind. "Were you able to bring all of your belongings you need?"

"Yes. Partially. Thing is." Ashely glanced at the ground and rubbed her toe in the dirt.

Jo walked over to her. "Having second thoughts? You don't have to come. We would appreciate your help."

"It's not that. Pastor Stork told me about a little girl. A six-year-old named Mabel Viola."

Jo closed her eyes. "What about her?"

"Her parents are both in hospice. They expect to die in the next few weeks. They've been sick since before their daughter was born."

"What do her parents want?"

"They want me to take her, so she can begin to live, and not see their last days."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know. I know I'm going to have a baby. It's just. I haven't been around kids since I was a kid. I don't know what they need to grow up right. Healthier than I am."

"What will happen if you don't take her?"

"She goes into state custody tonight. She will never see her parents, or anyone she knows. A quiet life in a hospice hospital is all she has ever known."

"She loses no matter what. What are you going to do?"

Ashley looked up at her. "May I bring her with me? My car is loaded with my things. She has almost nothing."

"I think so. Come on. Let's take you back to the center and unloaded. Then together, we will go find her."

Ashley's phone buzzed. She glanced at it. "We don't have much time. Her mom is declared dead."

"Lead me to the hospice. We will put her things in my van. And some of yours if needed."

Ashley wiped away a tear. "Are there other kids there?"

"Yes. Hurry."

Case File

Focus: Mabel Viola, female, age 4
Reporter: Ashley Chardell, female, age 22
Abuser: Mable's Parents
Abuse type: Chronic Illness and Death
Family:
Mother - Cryella Viola, female, age 34
Father - Dale Viola, male, age 35

Interview

She followed Ashley a few blocks to the Hospice building. It wasn't what she expected.

The building had once been a small hotel with outdoor rooms. When most people thought of Hospice, they pictured dying in their own homes surrounded by family and friends. Here, it was different. Many people retired here. Most had no family of friends for hundreds of miles. If they had any family at all.

They walked into the small front office.

A nurse looked up. "Here to see Mabel?"

Ashley nodded.

"I'll need to see your identification. There are lots of legal paperwork that will need to be completed."

"I thought they signed everything earlier."

The nurse smiled. "They did. The girl is so young, and you so new in her life, we have to verify you will give her a safe place to live."

Ashley gulped. "I'm moving. I'll take her with me."

Jo stepped forward. "Here. Let me help. Ashley is going to help at the Home Track Village. Here are the credentials." She handed the woman a pile of papers that would prove who she was, and her organization's purpose.

The nurse glanced at the paperwork. "We will fill it in with this. It is a government order after all."

After the paperwork, they were led to room 610. The nurse unlocked the door.

Jo stepped inside.

The room was darkened. Like any hotel room. They had never increased the lighting for the dying. For some, increased lighting might hurt the eyes.

The bathroom was piled with dirty towels and clothes.

Beyond, were two beds. One, closest to the window, freshly emptied and made.

The one closest to the door was messy. Sheets and blankets thrown around. A skeleton of a man, barely visible, curled in one corner.

"Mabel?" Ashley walked past the bed to a desk cluttered with dim objects.

A tiny head popped up on the other side of the bed. "Picking up my puzzle pieces."

"Mabel. You be good for Ashley." A whisper of words. That soon would be gone.

"I will. I'll never forget you an Momma."

"If you do, we'd understand. We weren't the best of parents. We couldn't give you anything."

"You listened to me talk every day." Mabel lifted a box onto the bed. "I'll leave Sunshine with you. You'll remember me. Until you have to go away."

The man reached his hand to the tiny shadow Mabel handed him. "Sunshine. No. Take your bunny with you. To remember us."

"How will you remember me?"

"Happy and smiling. Swimming in the pool. Relaxing in the sunshine. Reading a book. Walking Ginger."

Mabel bounded up on the bed. "Ginger. I can't take her, can I?"

The man looked up at Ashley. "Ginger is the Yorkie who lives next door."

"Do you want to take her?" Jo asked.

"If Peachy has to leave, who will take care of Ginger?"

"I will check with Peachy, if you will allow Mabel to take Ginger. I know Ginger has been a comfort for her." The nurse left the room.

Has been. That was the key word. "Mabel, do you want to come with us?"

"I have to go somewhere. I can't stay here." Mabel picked up a small bag on the desk. "I'm ready."

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to your dad?" Ashley held out her hand.

Mabel reached her hand out to Ashley. "I already did. I've known this day would come."

"Is this all you are taking?"

The little girl nodded.

"Sir, are you sure she doesn't have anything else?"

"No. We never had much money, and couldn't travel to buy her things. Take her. She'll be fine." He turned away.

The door opened and a tiny bundle of fur barged in and jumped into Mabel's arms.

Mabel buried her head in the tiny dog's fur.

Rescue

Ashley led her out to the vehicles.

Jo glanced back at the man. The glisten on his cheek was not sweat, even if it was warm in the tiny room.

She walked over to him and squatted on the floor to see his face.

"We tried to take care of her. We hoped for a cure. This was her only home. Hurts." His eyes closed. More tears joined those already there.

This man would soon join his wife in death. The one place where they would know health and joy. They must see their daughter happy in her new home. It would take time.

She patted his hand as she stood up.

His eyes opened, then closed.

She softly closed the door behind her.

Release

The nurse locked it. "He won't suffer long. She kept them going all these years."

"Do many come like this?"

"Come and go. Most as elderly adults, like Peachy next door. That's not her real name of course." The nurse pointed at the pup and Mabel chasing in the parking area. "She has been our sunshine for six years."

"You'll miss her."

"Yes. She'll have a chance to live. One of the few who leave here for a life, not to die in a hospital, or with a relative more interested in the inheritance than the person."

"Oh no."

The nurse walked toward her building. "Too often. Go. Be safe."

Ashley waited for her. "You'll have to lead the way. I don't know where we are going."

Mabel and Ginger stopped in front of them.

"I know. Somewhere fun!" Mabel picked up the Yorkie and settled into a seat in Ashley's car.

"An adventure." Ashley closed the driver's door.

Adventure. Perhaps. Work, more work, and more work. And worry. Hurt people. People in mental, emotional, and physical pain.

Chapter 20

Lennie - Gibbon Allen - Year 14

Another night he should have been home already.

Tracie had brought Lennie a Chinese takeout dinner while he read the latest case on Gibbon Allen.

Case File

Focus: Gibbon Allen, male, age 14
Reporter: Tracie Baxter, female, age 32
Abuser: parents and grandparents
Abuse type: Emotional, Verbal, Physical, Neglect
Family:
Mother - Patricia Allen, female, age 37
Father - Wallen Allen, male, age 38
Grandmother - Velda Allen female, age 62
Grandfather - Weber Allen male, age 64

A male client. Not too uncommon. Particularly for young children.

Zadema had spoken with him, and brought her Uncle Chris to the school to meet with him. She had stayed in the room while the teen begged for help to escape from the abuse of his parents and grandparents.

Gibbon had a complicated past. He was aware of what went on at home. And, that it wasn't normal. Until his teachers had spoken to him, he believed it was normal.

After all, most kids grew up thinking their lives were like everyone else's. The shock of realization had hit the teen boy painfully. He had researched his chances. They weren't good. If he didn't escape now, while he was aware, he might become like them.

Them.

His parents abused him verbally and physically. Neglecting to provide the basics: clean clothing, a safe place to sleep, a place to clean up, water, and food.

They had the money. They chose not to care for their son and grandson.

Chris had listened to the sordid details.

If it weren't for his teachers, Gibbon would only have one meal a week.

If it weren't for school, he'd only have access to running water, and a bathroom break, one time per week.

If it weren't for school, he'd basically live locked in a closet of a room with little more than a mattress, and a blanket.

The abuse didn't end there.

His mother's family was denied access to the family. They hadn't seen Gibbon in almost a decade. Chris had confirmed that.

His father's family was only allowed to see him a few times a year. His father's parents weren't any better than his parents.

In fact, Gibbon knew he visited, and stayed overnight. With no memory of his visits from the time he arrived, to the time he left.

What happened on those visits?

Gibbon was afraid to go back. That was all he remembered.

Fear of the unknown.

Afraid to go home, to the only home he knew. If it could be called that.

The report said more. Much more. It cited specific examples of verbal and emotional abuse unleashed by the adults he called his parents.

Although the report had been submitted to him electronically, Chris stopped by. His face had said more than the words he spoke. Those words would haunt him. "I deciphered what I could from the river of tears."

The report blinked and blurred on the screen.

This would be their first full-fledged rescue attempt with the new system Jo had created.

Was he ready?

Was she?

Lennie's phone buzzed.

"Hi Karen. You working late?"

"Yeah. You have the go ahead. Whatever it takes. Gibbon has the right to live."

"It's come to that train of thought."

"Thanks to Tarina. Without her passing Ruby's law, we wouldn't stand a chance."

"Any news for Ruby?" Lennie sipped his cold coffee.

"No. She's here. Every time we find the trail, it runs cold before we catch up. Soon, Darby will be old enough to ask for help from the schools, if the teachers believe him. He's eight now. Or will be in a few hours."

"Wouldn't they believe him?" The screen filled with Gibbon's notes flickered in front of him.

"Tracie would. Not many. Too many end up being told they are making it up. Some kids do have active imaginations. If they ask the parent in this case, Liam Duffy, what do you think would happen?"

"I guess so. We have to assume guilty until proven innocent it seems."

"While teachers have to assume the student has a creative streak until proven otherwise. We all hope he doesn't come to trust and believe the stories Liam is telling him."

"Have you talked to any teachers?"

Karen's line went quiet for a moment. "One today. That's why I am telling you this. She is at home crying that she dared tell the boy to move on with his life after his mother abandoned him."

"Darby knows that's not what happened." Lennie slammed his fist down.

"It's been two years. You hear a story repeated enough from the person you live with, and your teachers, who are you to believe? Especially at his age."

"We need to find him. And Anne too."

"We will. I know we will. Meanwhile, I have another call coming in."

Lennie saved the document in front of him.

Chris would be at the school in the morning to meet with Gibbon.

The boy was supposed to bring everything that he wanted to keep to school without arousing suspicion.

The thought of leaving so much behind. Clothes, electronics, books, games, toys, if he had them. Objects that mattered. Or could be used to trace him someday.

His phone buzzed.

Karen called back. "Lennie."

"Yes."

"It went deadly. The teacher was found murdered a half hour ago. The policewoman who took her testimony today was the responding officer."

Lennie lowered his head. The webbing Liam had cast had snared even more people into death. Their only hope was that the law his sister-in-law had created would save more lives than he destroyed. "Sure it was him?"

"Her blood was used to write 'The boy and girl are mine, and mine alone.'"

"Every school in the country should be contacted."

"Done months ago. Liam may move further off the grid, and not send them to school anymore." Karen's voice choked.

"I'll let you know how tomorrow goes."

"Please do. I'm hoping Liam finds Kyle. There is a chance. These types of people tend to find each other." Karen hung up her end of the conversation.

Lennie pushed the cold coffee away. It splashed around in the cup. A few drops sloshed out to join other dried coffee stains.

So many people whose lives had wrapped up together in a web. Connected by the thread of abuse. As the strings pulled taunt, they would snap, and break so many innocent lives around them.

He couldn't save them all. There was no place on the planet large enough to hold all of the abuse survivors.

If enough survivors worked together and overcame the past they had no control over, perhaps they would spread out and rescue those who remained, and prevent future generations from being trapped in the web of abuse.

He turned off the computer and locked the office up tight.

The morning sun had not lost its painful, early morning chilly glare, when he unlocked the door.

Before Lennie even sat down, his phone buzzed.

"Hello Chris."

"Are you ready for the practice today? It should be clear. No trouble expected."

"Do you believe that?" Lennie unplugged the computer and almost dunked the cord into the cup of yesterday's cold coffee.

"No. It's a hope, anyway."

"I'll be at the school after the buses leave. Tell Zadema to stay. We can't risk her being hurt."

"She won't stay."

"We can't let her skip classes."

"I don't think we have a choice. This will teach her more about the real world than any class."

"I wish she had a chance to be a normal teen."

"So do I. I'm proud of my niece. She has a purpose in life. See you shortly."

Lennie sat the phone down. No point in opening the laptop. He carried the cup to the building kitchen to rinse it out. The stains from many nights being left half full made it difficult to know when the present coffee had been cleaned away.

After Lennie returned to the office, he called Jo. "You ready?"

"I hope so. Systems running. Almost to the office."

Rescue

Jo picked him up. They drove to the school.

Chris pulled up beside them. "Go to the kitchen drop off area."

Jo drove the van around back. She parked.

A tall, thin teen walked out of the school. His pale skin matched his white shirt. He held his eyes up to the sun and looked at them.

Zadema walked out at his side. "Let's go." She pushed the boy into the van.

"Hello Gibbon. Curl up in the lower seat back there. There is concern."

The boy nodded. "Did they find out?"

"Possibly. Did you bring anything?"

"No. Nothing. He ducked his head."

"Lennie, I need you to listen to the radio with Chris. He'll stay a ways behind us. We'll be met at the county line by another policeman."

Lennie put the headset on. Basic chatter.

Jo drove through the streets, slightly above the speed limit.

"Have to switch now," Chris said. "I'll stop at the next intersection."

"He's stopping." Lennie glanced at Jo. "Everything seems fine."

Jo gripped the steering wheel.

"What's wrong?"

"That's not the patrol car that is supposed to be following us. Keep the radio on with Chris."

Lennie nodded.

The patrol car flashed their lights.

"Cover yourselves!" Jo slowed the van to a stop.

Gibbon and Zadema covered up with a blanket.

As a man in a uniform stepped toward the van, Jo turned the radio volume on full.

Release

Lennie looked closer at the uniform on the man. It wasn't legit. It was a costume from a local acting theater. He tapped a signal to Chris.

The man glanced in the window. "What a you hiding in the back there? Stowaways?"

"No stowaways." Jo gripped the steering wheel. Her knee bounced.

"Have reports of runaways. Any of those?"

"Nope."

The man leaned back on and stared at her face. "What are you transporting?"

"I'm sorry, there are only people in this van."

"I don't believe you. Open the door."

"Help is on the way." Chris whispered into the headphones.

The man jerked the van door open.

Gibbon sat up.

Lennie turned.

"You can't have me. I'm not going back."

The uniformed man grinned. "You don't have to." He pulled out a gun and shot Gibbon in the chest.

Gibbon slumped over. "Peace."

The man who had shot the teen was arrested by Chris and the responding officers. He claimed to be Gibbon's father. The justice system was so backed-up, it would be years before the murder charges would be tried.

Chapter 21

Jo - Nick Garber - Year 14

Jo closed the door. This last phone call from Lennie had been unusual. An adult male. Nick Garber. Age 48. Three grown daughters. Two sons at home.

In some ways, Nick's wife reminded Jo of Janella. A strong-willed woman, who would not let any man walk over her. Nick, and his sons, were too terrified to even think about a future without answering to Ivy Garber.

The clock said 10:20 pm. She grabbed her keys. Nick would be dropped off at his job shortly. She'd have to meet him there, in a tiny spot outside the security camera view. Why had a 17-year-old requested help for his father?

Daisy walked by with her toddler. "Going out?"

"Yes. You okay?"

"Going to help Janella. She has a program that needs work."

"You can do that during the day."

Daisy tightened her grip on the struggling toddler. "She moves around better when most people are asleep. See you in the morning."

Jo sighed. Janella hadn't been able to walk. Her legs weren't communicating with her brain. It wasn't good to keep Daisy up at night, and away from others. Her recovery would be stunted. She'd have to talk to her soon. In the van, she set her phone to read the Garber aloud.

Case File

Focus: Nick Garber, male, age 48
Reporter: Bran Garber, male, age 17
Abuser: Ivy Garber, female, age 48
Abuse type: Emotional and Neglect
Family:
Wife - Ivy Garber, female, age 48
Daughter - Shea Garber, female, age 24

Daughter - Nella Garber, female, age 22
Daughter - Twillen Garber, female, age 20
Son - Bran Garber, male, age 17
Son - Kelsey Garber, male, age 15

Interview

A half hour later, she parked in a secluded spot near her destination.

The building loomed in the distance. A warehouse with a dubious reputation. Her destination was a tiny side door hidden by a dumpster. She sidled past the dumpster, ripe with rubbish from days past.

The side door opened. A man stepped out with a bag of garbage. He tossed it over the side and pushed the door almost closed. He stooped below the dumpster lid. "Jo?"

Jo clutched her phone. "Are you Nick Garber?"

"Yes. I don't have much time." He pointed to a folding chair against the wall. "Sorry we have to meet like this."

She sat down.

He slid to the ground. "Never thought it'd be this way. I belong in there." He pointed a crooked thin finger at the ripe dumpster.

The chilly desert night air gave her goose bumps. "Why do you think that?"

He looked up at her. His eyes shone wet with tears in the spotlight that illuminated where the camera didn't. "I married her. I knew what she was. And how she raised our daughters to hurt men. I knew. I don't want my sons to be like this. Is it too late for them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ivy. She was hurt by a bad bully. He's been murdered in prison years ago now. Only. The prison he left her in, can't be breached."

Jo waited. Nick's story touched a nerve. A prison that couldn't be breached. It made sense.

"What happened?"

He put his hands over his face. "She was pregnant. Her parents would never have understood. Shea is his child. I promised to care for Ivy, no matter what. She can't stand the sight of Shea."

Jo closed her eyes. This happened to more people than it should. Everyday. "You had four of your own with her?"

He nodded. "She treated it like a punishment. Hoped with each one she'd come to value Shea. Or maybe." He turned away.

Jo knew what he was thinking. Ivy had hoped to die in child birth.

"How does Bran want me to help you?"

He gulped. "He thinks you will take the three of us away from Ivy. My daughters are grown. They can't stand the sight of me. She saw to that. Nella and Twillen are both in college on a business career path. They'll be fine."

Maybe. They could end up like their mother. "How about Shea?" The girl who shouldn't have been born.

Nick groaned. "She's in prison. Two kids of her own. Drugs. Who knows who the father is of the two kids."

Jo touched his head. "Are you sure?" That was difficult to imagine, that he had no idea. Being totally reliant on his wife for transportation, and everything else, could explain it.

He nodded. "My sons want to escape. They want me to leave with them. I made a promise to Ivy. And to Shea."

"Did Ivy promise to treat you well?"

He balled his fists and hit the ground. "Yes."

"Did she keep that promise?"

"No." He lowered his head.

"Perhaps."

"Her broken promise is no reason to break mine."

"You said you promised Shea."

He nodded.

"You can't help her where you are. Where are Shea's kids?"

He gulped. "State sent them to my sister."

"You don't want to leave your wife?"

"No. I can't."

"Do you want to help Shea?" Jo watched his eyes. They seemed sincere.

"Yes." Nick looked out over the garbage yard scenery.

"What about your sons?"

"They are okay, aren't they?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Do you want them to be like you?"

"They do so much at school. When she goes to work shopping, we talk. They explore the internet at school. We don't have a computer that they are allowed to use. Kelsey wants to take driver's ed. Ivy won't let either one of them drive."

"Why not?"

"That's what happened to her. He took her driving as soon as he had his license. He hurt her. Several times. Over two months. She didn't know how to escape. She won't let her boys be like that."

Jo closed her eyes. A sure way to make them that way. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Bran's counselor said the only phone at home is the one his mom uses. And that he has never been allowed to use a phone."

Nick nodded.

"You have never driven."

"She hasn't even let me renew my license. I have a license. I have coworkers who take me to keep it up to date. Have to, so I have a license to run the equipment."

"What else are you not allowed to do?"

"No contact with my family. I miss my sister and my mom. No shopping. Nothing. I work and go home. No TV even."

"What?"

"She says it portrays men in too dangerous of a light."

"What do you do in you time off?"

"Remain quiet. Hide. Ivy works all day. I have to stay quiet my nights off work. I read."

Jo leaned back. Her head touched the building behind her. None of this sounded good. Red flags everywhere. Did he know what Bran had told the counselor?

"I have to go back in and do my work."

"Which is what?"

He looked away. "A janitor. I wanted to be a doctor."

Bran did as well. His mother had ripped up his college application saying no son of hers would go to college. His counselor had him redo it and send it in using her office address.

Nick stood up.

"Nick. What happens when Bran graduates from school in a few months?"

"I don't know. She told me to ask my boss to find him a job here."

"Do you want that for your son?"

He walked to the door. "What choice do I have? I made a promise." He opened it and walked in.

Jo stood up and walked back to her van.

She steered toward the Home Track Village. At the city boundary, she turned around.

What was going on in that house at night?

She drove down the street. There it was. A two-story colonial home. Two cars parked in the drive. A man's laughter echoed out of a window.

Bran didn't tell the counselor all he knew. She was sure of that.

The next day, Jo went to the school where Bran and Kelsey waited to be interviewed. The counselor showed her into a small office with a round table. Iona Glenn sat in front of her.

"I've worried about Bran for three years. Now Kelsey. They don't cause trouble. They seem to be a magnet for it. Never stand up for themselves."

Jo made coded notes on her phone. "Do they talk about their family life?"

"No teacher mentions it. Only about each other. They fear going home. Wish you had sent a male interviewer. They might talk to a man before a woman." The counselor stood up and left the room.

It matched what Nick Garber had told her.

Moments later, Bran Garber walked in. He did not close the door. He did not speak. He sat and refused to look at her.

"Bran. I met with your father last night."

"Good."

A question burned in her mind to ask. The time wasn't right. "What do you want to do after school?"

"Can I trust you?"

She nodded.

"I want to be a doctor. And take my brother somewhere safe. And see my niece and nephew. I've seen them once."

"Do you know where your niece and nephew are?"

Bran shook his head.

Jo glanced at the paper the counselor had handed her.

"Do you know your dad's family?"

He turned away. Then back to her. "I'm not supposed to know he has a family. A sister, parents, and cousins I've never met."

Jo held her breath. This typically only occurred to girls kept locked in closets their entire lives. "Do your sisters know your dad's family?"

"I don't know. Mom kept me and Kelsey away from them. We were not allowed to speak to them."

"Tell me about your home life."

Bran leaned forward. "I don't want them to know. They wouldn't understand." He then told Jo a tale that didn't sound like it should be coming from a young man. His sisters had grown up, pampered and spoiled, given everything. They had been known to spit on him and his brother on the rare occasions when they were allowed together. Nella and Twillen were off in college. Shea was missing. At least, that is what his dad had told him.

A knock at the door interrupted them. They had five minutes left. "Do you feel safe at home?"

"No. I'll manage if I have to."

"Be brave. It'll take time to organize. I will call back."

Bran stood up and held out his hand. "Thanks for listening." He turned and walked out the door.

His words burned her heart. There were so many questions to ask. Too many unanswered, unimaginable pains he must have known through the years to reach this point. He functioned. And wanted to move forward. How much of his growth was stunted? Could he overcome it?

The door opened. A woman stepped in. "You are Jo Forester?"

She nodded.

"I'm Clara. I teach reading and writing to Bran and Kelsey."

"Sit down."

The woman pushed a paper to Jo. "Don't look at it here. It's my notes. I knew the sisters. We have a few years to help them. With boys, we have to be careful. Girls, it's easier." She left the room.

Jo tucked the pages into her pocket.

Sometimes the investigations led to nothing. Like in Janella's case. The parent needed a little help, something anyone could have done without a report. This case, should have made it to child and family services years ago. Teachers had worked so long to keep the boys as close to healthy as possible.

Jo pulled into the lot of Lennie's office. He'd be waiting.

He sat at his desk staring at his screen.

"A moment." He clicked a few more times and leaned back in his chair. "What do you think?"

"We'll need Chris. A security camera set up across the street from the residence for a few days. I'm suspicious."

Lennie nodded. "Understandable."

Jo pulled out the teacher's notes. "Let me look at these a few minutes. Haven't had a chance." The first page contained things they pretty much knew already. The second was an updated account of Bran and Kelsey's moods and behaviors. Mostly withdrawn and silent. Stayed away from everyone in class. No friends. The next page was an essay by Bran.

She read it line by line. Then read between the lines. What had he left unsaid?

"Deep thoughts?" Jo looked up. "Yeah. His mom keeps the boys locked in a room when not in school. When she's at work, their dad sometimes tries to sneak in and see them."

"That's not normal."

"Nor is this. 'One night, dad had the dad of one of my classmates pick us up. We had to quietly open the window, and sneak down the block. Who was in the house with mom? Anyway, we went to dad's work, and called and talked to his parents, and our aunt from there. My friend's mom took us back home, and we snuck back in the window. Mom's visitor was there. They make noise. More than they did before our sisters left home.' At least he suspects."

Lennie covered his eyes. "This won't be easy."

"It never is."

He picked up his next file. "I'll call Chris. Need his help on this one too."

Jo left the office and drove out to see Cousin Nani.

The investigation was simple enough. Chris, out of uniform, and a fellow officer in uniform, set up the camera trap. Camera was set up with direct feed. Its battery expected to last three days. Two evenings later, Chris drove a car with loosened lug nuts to across the street from the Garber home. When the tire fell off, Chris, in regular clothes, waited for his back up officer. They made it look legit by taking at least a half hour to change the tire while collecting the camera.

The camera trap pulled out information in a hurry. Ivy and Nick Garber left at 10:40 pm to drop him off at work. Ivy returned at 11:20 pm. Fifteen minutes later, a car pulled in the drive. The camera caught the license plate number. It did not leave until 6 am.

Chris ran the plate through the system.

Chris, Jo, and Lennie gathered in Lennie's office.

"What did it turn up?" Jo twitched her fingers.

"Can't tell you exacts. I'd say your suspicions are confirmed." Chris turned his radio settings down.

"What do you recommend?" Lennie folded his hands and leaned forward.

"A few options. We know she leaves the boys to care for themselves. We know they are able to sneak out the window at night. Night is the best time. They won't be able to take much out a window."

"And Nick?"

"Pick him up at work after she drops him off."

"If she finds out?"

"She won't miss him." Jo shifted in her chair. "How long has she had this visitor every night?"

"No way to know." Chris's phone beeped. He checked it. "Have to go. Let me know if you need me."

Jo nodded.

"Has anyone spoken to Ivy?" Lennie asked.

"Not that I know of." Chris opened the door. "The neighbor warned me not to abandon my car there. She would call the cops. Ms. Garber doesn't speak to anyone."

After Chris left, Jo sat and stared at Lennie. "It should be simple. Either night or day would work. At night, she might be home early. Her visitor might arrive too soon. They might hear something."

"By day, neighbors might notice more." Lennie stirred his cold coffee.

"If there are any home."

"Either way it will be a challenge. Hope we manage. Without someone getting hurt. The boys don't deserve to be hurt."

"Will they be there mentally? Will they hurt the women at the village?" There were so many questions Jo couldn't answer. She didn't know them well enough. No one did. What happened in the next few years would be a tremendous player in how their lives unfolded.

"I don't know. That's what concerns me. In so many ways, I see Kyle's father in Nick." Lennie gulped the coffee and spit it back out.

"If the women are scared of them, it won't help. They may not even intend to scare them more. It may happen." He plugged in the cup warmer and sat his cup on it.

"Perhaps we need a different village for men?"

"I don't think we'll need a full working village. Not like for the women. To abide by Ruby's law, we'd need them locked in."

Bran and Kelsey would recover, if they were younger. At this age, they might not be. Difficult to know.

"Men would generally adjust better." Lennie said.

"They are at risk. No matter what."

"I know."

"Perhaps Janella will suggest something. She would be good for them." Jo laughed. "Or, maybe she is too overbearing. Like their mom."

"She might have an idea."

"Let's find a safe place for them to." Jo sighed. It was easier to hide women. There were so many more of them.

Bran had months, and Kelsey had years to go, to reach legal age. Bran, they could rescue if they left his father and brother behind. That wasn't a good idea either. The promise had been that they needed a safe place, where the rescued people couldn't leave, so that the law couldn't touch them.

Occasionally, squelched males became the bullies of the next generation, especially if they went to a place where people were used to being cowed. The Home Track Village wasn't safe for them. They'd have to wait.

Rescue

A place had been found. Karen had agreed, and obtained signatures so that they could use it for Nick and his sons. It would be a smaller transition village. A few miles from the Home Track Village. It would be out of state, so technically illegal to transport Kelsey there without both parent's permission. The mother, Ivy, would never give it.

It would be three buildings, one little more than a barracks at the moment. The men themselves would erect the fence around the perimeter. After that, it would abide by the law. Until then, Karen, had managed to obtain permission to rescue Kelsey and Bran. They would be required to wear ankle bracelets to follow the letter of the law. That was bad. It could be worse. This new village would be part of the processing center, and a place where transport would be initiated for, and potentially carried out, for all of the New Underground Railroad locations.

Night, or day? That was the question.

Bran's counselor, Iona Glenn, called Jo. "We need you to come for them tomorrow. Bran is in trouble. For most students, we would call the parents. We know not to in this case."

"What did he do?"

"He fell asleep at lunch. His hand landed on a girl's lap. She complained. I believe he did fall asleep. I've seen him sleep during lunch. He said they had snuck out the night before to go wish his dad's parents a happy anniversary. He said he's never met them."

"True."

"The girl's parents want to press charges."

"Can you stop them?"

"If he leaves the school for good. I've asked for a few days to talk to him. I trust him."

The counselor paused as someone spoke behind him. "They kept her out of school today."

"It should be easy to tell if he was asleep."

"I think this young lady is in a bad place. She shouldn't have been sitting next to him, if she were afraid of him. The teachers have been requiring all seats to be filled in order of sitting down, rather than sitting with friends. They think it encourages peace."

Jo sighed. "Guess it's tomorrow then."

"Be here early. You have all day."

The following morning, Jo met Chris at Lennie's office. Lennie had to stay and manage several more serious cases.

Chris walked over to her van. "Think they are ready?"

"Should be. We are going to the back, where food is delivered anyway. They'll be walked out through the cafeteria doors."

"That sounds good. Let's go."

Jo drove to the back of the school and backed into the food drop off area.

The door opened, and the boys stepped out carrying a bag. They hurried into the back of the van. Iona Glenn waved by to them.

"Keep them safe."

"We will." Jo closed the doors and made sure they couldn't open.

When she stepped into the driver's seat she looked back at Bran and Kelsey. "Whatever you do, don't make a sound, or look out the window when we arrive to pick up your father. Hide on the floor. He knows we are coming."

The boys nodded and sat against the side of the van clutching their bags.

Jo drove to the home. This was a risk. Always a risk. A car was parked in the drive. She glanced at Chris. She parked the van one house down.

"Not the mother's. Or the other."

Jo gulped. It could be anyone. They'd have to be careful.

The side door opened. Nick stepped out. He pushed the door closed. He trotted toward the van.

Chris stepped out and helped him in the front seat.

"Nella's here. Get us out quickly. She's looking for something. Told her I'd look in the shed."

Jo didn't wait. She pulled out and hurried the van as quickly as she could without arousing suspicion.

"Any reason why today?"

"Her college spring break starts tomorrow. She wants to go to the beach. Ivy said okay. And gave her money."

"We've never been to the beach," Kelsey hugged his bag.

"Someday." Nick leaned against the walls and glanced at his sons. "It's not fair what all you have had to miss out on."

Jo made it to the building without being followed. She drove into the garage door covered loading dock. The door closed behind them.

Chris led them into the warehouse office. "I know it isn't much. Here you'll live. And work until legal proceedings free you. I'm sorry you have to put the ankle bracelets on. It's for your protection. To protect Kelsey, if your mom tries to kidnap you and take you back."

"She better not."

Chris attached the bracelets to their legs. All three of them. He then showed them around the three-building area they would live and work in.

Release

Jo handed the case over to Chris reluctantly. While it wasn't safe to have three men with the female survivors, it wasn't good to see them kept locked up like criminals either. Even if it was for their safety.

Janella moved with her two children, Brenton and Carina, to the warehouse soon after Nick, Bran and Kelsey arrived. They helped build a room for them and the two younger ones.

The fence went up nicely. No one was known to be watching them. There had been no known contact from Ivy Garber.

It seemed everything was going well. Once the court heard the case, granted a divorce for Nick Garber, and gave him custody of his sons, they could move on with their lives. It didn't go according to the plan.

Ivy Garber never contested the divorce. After six months, her attorney recommended that Bran be allowed to be on his own, and free from the location tag. He also recommended that Kelsey be placed in a school close to the location where he was living, to remain with a tag until he turned eighteen. For Nick, he recommended community service, not counting what he had already done working on the center. In order to do so, his tag had to be removed. He would be on probation.

It was a landmark case. The first for the state under Ruby's law that dealt with male survivors of abuse.

Jo was there the day the bracelets were taken off of Nick and Bran.

"Something I'm glad to do." Chris parked his patrol car inside the shiny gate.

"I should hope so." Jo stretched her legs before climbing out.

"They didn't deserve it. Do you have the house ready for them?"

Jo nodded. "All picked out and ready. Nick will start a new job in three days. Day work."

"About time."

Chris opened the door.

Several men and their children now occupied the building. Along with Janella, a counselor, and a few other helpers. They all cheered and clapped when they walked in.

Bran walked down the hall. "I'm happy. I will go to college now. And be a doctor, like I wanted."

"What kind of doctor?" Jo glanced at her paper. He had grown in the last month.

"Yes. A generalist. I want to help find people and save them. Give you lots more work to do. Soon, there'll be more survivors getting help."

"More on the inside than the outside? Sure there's enough room?" Jo laughed. Where would they all go?

A picture formed in her mind. A circle of fences holding in everyone who had survived abuse, with their abusers on the outside, taking over the land. Only thing was, some who survived would turn into abusers themselves, and they'd be kicked out. Eventually, they'd have a healthy civilization inside the fence. In a few hundred years. She laughed. It wasn't as easy as a few thousand years ago, when survivors would pick up and move away from abusers. They couldn't do that now. There was nowhere for them to go.

Kelsey sat in the chair last. "I know my bracelet has to stay on. Can it be loosened?"

Chris checked. "It has to be. Don't want you to lose your leg." He adjusted it. "Wish you could leave it off."

"I wear it as a badge of honor. I won't let her get me down. She never wanted me anyway. Come on Dad. Let's go home."

The Garber men left together as happy as could be under the circumstances.

Janella rolled over to her as the others left. "They stand a chance. A small one. I think they'll pull each other through."

Jo nodded. "Shea's children?"

"Joining her at Home Track Village soon. She'll be there. The men will be able to visit her. Not too soon. Her probation officer is giving her three months in the Village before she is cleared to live on her own." Janella rolled toward her office. "Wish I could chat. Have work to do."

Jo smiled. So much hope for so many in one family. More to help.

Chapter 22

Odelena Smith - Year 14

Concurrent with Nick Garber

Lennie tapped the keys on his laptop computer. Nick Garber's case would be worrisome. The case he had been working on when Jo arrived was as bad, although the opposite gender. This one could be dangerous.

Case File

Focus: Odelena Smith, female, age 36
Reporter: Ms. Trepan, son's teacher
Abuser: Flanagul Smith, husband, male, age 38
Abuse type: Emotional, Verbal, Physical
Family:
Husband - Flanagul Smith, male, age 38
Son - Gero Smith, male, age 12
Son - Hector Smith, male age 8

Interview

The coffee pot gurgled.

He turned to look at Anne's picture. "Are you like her? Is Odelena Smith you in a different set of circumstances?"

The intake notes of Chris and fellow officers stung. Gero Smith, age 12 had taken his brother, Hector Smith, age 8, for a ride in the family car. He had then crashed it into a shop two miles from home. The boys were drug tested, and evidence of drugs had been found. The father, Flanagul Smith claimed they were medications for a disorder caused by his wife. He even said that in front of her. She averted her eyes and scratched the ground.

It wasn't the first time Gero had been in trouble with the law. It wouldn't be the last. He had broken into homes, stolen from grocery stores. Been kicked out of three schools. And a young woman, thirteen for three days, had accused him of rape.

Lennie closed his laptop. These days. Cases were getting more difficult. More painfully close to home. The trail to Anne had gone cold over a dozen years ago. Although his mom never said a word, he knew she wondered if he would ever move on and date another woman. There had been hope she would be found. Then, he had feared it would make an easy life, and make the cases seem less real, and the search for Anne less vital. Now. There were too many Anne's out there. Anne under another name, in another life. Lost. Unable to live as any person should.

He arrived at the house where Odelena and her family lived. The house looked like a typical house. Clean and whole on the outside. Mowed lawn. No yard toys. No flowers or trees. Too empty. No sign that anyone lived here. Lennie checked the address. The correct one.

He walked up to the door and rang the doorbell.

The door creaked open. "Hello." A tear stained face peered out at him.

"Hi. I'm Lennie Darendale. Are you Odelena Smith?"

She nodded and pushed the door open.

He walked in behind her. While she closed the door, he caught a quick glance around the empty living room. There was a couch, a chair, and an end table. No sign of a family. Nothing that would belong to one of the two boys.

Odelena motioned to the couch.

He sat down. He placed his laptop on his lap without opening it.

She sat in the chair opposite. "My husband has to work."

"That's fine." It wasn't. Although, hearing Odelena's story alone might be better. A more accurate picture. Contrary to what he had learned in college all those years ago, people were more honest when difficult families spoke separately. Together, one, or more, shut down and hid what needed to be spoken.

"Tell me about you." These women seldom had anyone acknowledge them as a person. Sometimes, he had to circle back to the question later.

"Me? I exist. That is all."

Back to that question later. "Tell me about your boys. They are Gero and Hector, correct?"

Odelena turned away. "I hoped Hector would be okay."

"Okay how?"

"That the nicotine wouldn't affect him."

"You used to smoke." That could be bad for kids.

"Yes." Odelena hid her head. "As soon as I found I was pregnant with Gero, about three months along, I stopped. It was too late. The doctors said the damage had been done."

Damage would have been done. True. Not to that extent. "Did you throw them away that day?"

"No. Flanagul opened my purse and threw them away in front of the doctor. That's when the doctor said that. My husband made me go home and scrub everything with bleach, and repaint the walls."

Lennie closed his eyes. That would have affected the developing baby even worse. Going cold turkey would shock the growth cycle. Adding in the toxins in bleach and paint, it was almost amazing she didn't have a miscarriage. Or, maybe that was what Flanagul wanted.

"What happened after Gero was born?"

Odelena closed her eyes. "He told the doctor Gero would have ADHD and he had to be treated with medications."

"At what age?"

"Before he would bring him home as a newborn."

Lennie closed his eyes to hide his feelings. A child could not properly be diagnosed with ADHD until at least age 5. And even then, behavior therapy should be tried before medication.

"He's already worked his way through all the medications the doctors will allow him to take. They say they won't work anymore."

Gero was a drug addict, with no hope of recovery. Flanagul had made sure Odelena would suffer for the rest of her life for a mistake so many people made. This punishment extended to everyone in the family. And the community. Including the child. "Tell me about Hector?"

She smiled. "Hector was a good baby. He was well behaved. Until."

"Until?"

"Flanagul convinced the doctors he needed to be on medications for ADHD too."

"Whatever for?"

"Flanagul expected him to sit silently and still on an eight-hour car drive to visit his parents. At four, he couldn't do that. I warned him to be good."

"You do know, normal four year olds are talkative, noisy, playful children?"

Odelena nodded. "The ones nearby are. Flanagul won't let the boys play with them. Says their games, constant motion, and noise are a bad influence."

"What does he expect of children?"

"For them to sit silently. They are allowed to read."

"Have they ever had toys?" Lennie lessened the frustration in his voice.

"Not allowed. Any given as gifts were taken away as soon as the family member left."

He took a deep breath. A good reason for the boys to be bored. "What do your family say?"

"I don't know. We see them once per year."

"What about phone calls? Internet?"

She lowered her eyes and shook her head.

"Not allowed?"

"No."

"What do you want to happen?"

She whispered something he couldn't quite hear. He leaned closer. "Please?"

"I don't want to be a pee receptacle anymore."

He let the string of emotions show in his eyes. She had to know he understood and would do something.

"What do you want for Gero and Hector?"

"Is there any hope for them?"

"There is always hope." No matter how unlikely. He'd find a way to help them. "Where are they today?"

"I don't know. I asked them to be here. They left."

"Do they do what you ask of them?"

"No."

"Have they ever?"

"No."

"What does Flanagul say?"

She looked into his eyes. "That a true man never listens to a woman. He does what he wants regardless of what she says, thinks, or wants."

Lennie fought to keep his eyes open. This woman needed to see the pain he felt at such words. Kyle had been that way. That was why Anne was missing.

Odelena could be rescued. It would mean leaving her boys behind. They wouldn't fit into either village. They were too dangerous. Chris would have to take care of them. Send them to a youth recovery center.

"Is there any way I can help you?"

Her eyes pleaded for hope. Her fists clenched. She shook her head. Tears trickled down.

"I'll have to file my report. Tracie will contact you."

He stood up and walked out the door.

It clicked shut behind him.

Lennie took a deep breath before walking back to his car. This case was too close to him.

Rescue

"What can we do for Odelena?" Jo asked.

Lennie typed the final line of his report. "I wish I knew. Flanagul probably won't let her leave. He doesn't want her as a person. Only as an object. And Gero and Hector are a danger to themselves and everyone around them. On course to be identical to their father. We don't need any men like that, certainly not two more for the next generation."

"Is there any hope?"

"Maybe for Hector. I wouldn't count on it. With a name like that, he is being tortured in school."

Jo nodded. "He can't go to the Home Track Village. Nick's location for men isn't ready. It's primarily for those who will recover from abuse, not those who are abusers themselves. It's a fine line."

"Most abusers were abused. Breaking the cycle isn't easy." A tear dripped down Lennie's nose and landed in his coffee. "It's been twelve years. What about Anne's child?"

"Her child could be okay."

"She hated herself as much as Odelena hates herself."

"Did it last?" Jo leaned forward and patted his hand.

"You think she might have come to her senses?"

"She was strong and healthy for so long. She fell into a depression. I think she could have worked her way out of it."

Release

Someone knocked at the door.

"Yes."

"It's Chris. We are ready."

"I wish you could stay here." Jo glanced at the door.

"I'll be strong." He drained the tear-filled coffee cup.

Less than twenty minutes later, Lennie and Jo arrived at the Smith home. A curtain moved in the window.

Chris parked behind them, less than a block away.

Jo walked up to the door.

Odelena opened it. She glanced behind her.

Whatever she said, Lennie couldn't hear from the van driver's seat.

Jo stepped back.

Odelena closed the door.

Jo returned. "She can't leave right now. Gero is there."

"He should be in school."

"He wouldn't wake up this morning."

"I guess we try tomorrow." He turned the ignition on.

A loud bang occurred.

Lennie turned to the home.

It wasn't clean and pristine anymore. The roof floated in the air as it broke apart and scattered back down on the mowed yard. The front wall tilted outward. Smoke billowed from the back.

Lennie jerked the key out of the ignition as Jo ran for the home.

He reached the front walk as Chris arrived.

Chris's radio squawked. "Don't go too close. It could fall more."

"I'm going around back." Jo fled around the corner.

"We can't wait."

"The fire department will be here in a minute." Chris walked along checking at the wall's integrity.

Sirens blared closer.

Neighbors stepped out to see what was going on.

Jo hurried around the house with a piece of material. It looked like part of the shirt Odelena had been wearing moments before. Tears trickled out of her eyes.

"Did you see her?"

She nodded.

"I have to go to her."

"Don't. It's too late."

The fire department arrived.

He let them deal with the neighbors. Or Chris. He didn't care. He walked around the back of the house. The wall was out in the back yard in pieces. The stove hung from a rafter beam. Odelena's body was twisted on the ground. A cast iron cooking pan had landed on her head. A pool of blood, and other matter soaked the ground. Her back appeared broken, and her legs were spread wide.

Lennie closed his eyes. He sat down and cried until the tears could come no more.

Chapter 23

Jo - Faith Delaney - Year 14

Concurrent with Odelena Smith and Nick Garber

Jo checked the wiring on the van. A few of the transmissions from the last rescue had been garbled. At least it had been successful. Unlike the death of Odelena Smith a few days before. The blast could have damaged the electronics. As she searched under the dashboard for a specific wire, her phone buzzed.

"Hello."

"Hi Jo." Chris's voice was clear. "Have another case for you."

"Emergency?"

"No. No imminent danger. Long term problem. Trying to track down when it began at the moment."

"Checking wires. May I call you back in an hour?"

"How about I come to the village?"

"See you then." She sat her phone on the floor and tugged on a wire. There was a pinch in the wire. That could be the problem. She searched for the ends. They were raveled into the network of wires the vehicle needed to run.

An hour later, Chris arrived.

"Almost fixed." Jo plugged the new wire in and pulled herself out from under the dashboard.

Chris laughed. "May I offer you a hand?"

"What's so funny?"

"You have straw in your hair, grease on your face, and a rip in your shirt. Maybe I need to rescue you."

"Don't try it!" Jo pulled herself out of the van. She laughed as she wiped at the grease. A little laughter could be a good thing. "Meet me in the computer building. I'll be right there."

He walked off with a folder and bounced up the steps. Daisy's daughter played on the steps. He stopped and talked to her.

A few moments later she joined him at the conference table.

He handed her the folder. "A few years ago, we couldn't have helped this teen. Not sure she quite qualifies under the law. We need to prepare her for the future."

Jo flipped the cover to the case report.

Case File

Focus: Faith Delaney, female, age 17
Reporter: History Teacher to Iona Glenn, school counselor, female, age 35
Abuser: Mother - Gina Delaney, age 38
Abuse type: Neglect
Family:
Mother - Gina Delaney, female, age 38

Jo flipped the page to the first set of notes. Her history teacher had written several notes over the last six months. She glanced at the other pages. More teachers over the last four years had added their notes. At the back was a graph. It listed days for which homework was due and days Faith had been sleepy in class. Every day that homework had been due, she slept through class, and did not turn any work in. The reason? Nine out of ten times, she had to go to the hospital with her mother as soon as she was home from school. They would be there until after midnight. Sometimes, returning in time to drop her off at school without her bookbag.

Jo covered her eyes. Why did Faith's mother want her to fail? Would it be better to speak to Faith, or to her mother?

"Iona Glenn told me something."

Jo looked up.

"Faith's mom has several serious invisible illnesses. Her dad is a truck driver, and on the road more than at home. He depends on Faith to care for her mother. He has even encouraged her to quit school when she turns eighteen so she will be there all day and night."

"What?"

"The teachers say she is smart. If her parents would let her focus on her education."

"Does she want an education?"

"No idea. I haven't talked to her. Thinking about having Zadema befriend her."

Jo closed the folder. Technically, the mother, and father, weren't abusing her. All they could do was to reach out to Faith. And help her when she turned 18.

Interview

A few days later, Jo met with Zadema at the school. It would be interesting. Meeting with the teen, and Faith's teachers, and then Faith herself. Whether or not anything could be done to help Faith remained to be determined.

A bell rang somewhere in the school. It had a different tone than the days she had attended school there.

Zadema arrived. She sat across the table from her. In an office not unlike the one she and her friends had sat in so many years ago when Anne disappeared.

Jo wiped a tear away.

"It'll be okay." Zadema reached across the table to her.

Jo tried to smile. It wasn't easy. "A memory is all. Tell me."

Zadema glanced back at the closed door. "Faith is good. She is exhausted. I think her brain chemistry is altered from the lack of sleep. A few hours a night is not enough."

"True. What do you recommend?"

"No idea. She's not told her mom about homework. It didn't work. Her mom would catch her reading for class, and say they had to go to the hospital then."

"What does her mom have wrong with her?"

"Faith doesn't know. She's heard several things said. She doesn't think any of them are correct."

A knock at the door interrupted them.

Iona Glenn opened the door. "Zadema, time to return to class."

"Good luck." Zadema stood up and left.

Jo didn't move. It would be a difficult decision to make. Karen would be part of the process. Her knowledge of the law she helped write, would determine how, and when, they could help Faith Delaney.

The door opened. Several adults walked in. They sat down and introduced themselves as Faith's teachers.

Iona Glenn shuffled the papers in front of her. "We've searched back over the last four years. We've even contacted her junior high school teachers, her middle school teachers, and her elementary school teachers. There has been a pattern of neglecting her homework since age seven."

"Age seven?" Jo leaned back. A ten-year pattern of neglect.

"At that time, she might have homework once a week. Middle school teachers thought she was lazy, and slept in class. They assumed, without asking, that she played computer games all night."

"They should have asked." Jo made a note on her laptop.

"There were 45 students in each class. Even if they spent one minute speaking to each student individually, they wouldn't learn anything about them." One of the other teachers spoke up. "Most of the time, we are right. With Faith, we were wrong. I should have asked her something. Anything. Her writings from the time seemed normal, as long as I didn't assign homework."

More pieces of the puzzle.

"By junior high school, she was expected to complete homework every day." Ms. G. read the page in front of her. "Teachers complained of her completing other classes homework in their classes, and falling asleep."

A male teacher leaned forward. "This wasn't an uncommon problem. Occurs all the time. That's why I don't allow their bookbags in the classroom. Only the book for class, and a few sheets of paper. I knew my assignments were put off until last for her. I never thought anything about it. On Mondays, she was awake and alert. By Friday, she was asleep. Since class was after lunch, I assumed she was a morning student."

Jo glanced at the other junior high teacher.

"I never thought about it either. I figured her parents either didn't know she wasn't doing her homework, or didn't care if she did or not. I had no idea they were preventing her from doing it."

Jo made a few more notes. "Is there any evidence of any abuse other than neglecting to allow her to do her homework?"

All of the teachers shook their heads.

"She has older clothes, and doesn't dress warm enough for cold days. Maybe her parents shop at a thrift store. Nothing that seemed indicative of abuse." Iona Glenn looked at the teachers.

They all nodded.

"I'm not sure what we can do. Karen says it would have to be greater neglect than only skipping homework. Or another form of abuse." Jo looked at her notes. Faith had been set up for failure by those who should have helped her succeed. Why? Aunt Mary and Uncle Dan would never have done that to Anne. They gave her everything she needed. That they could afford. Homework time was vital. Not thrown away.

"I have to return to my school," one of the teachers said.

They said goodbye and left Jo sitting there. Thinking. Waiting. Wondering if Faith would come. What would be said. If there were any answers.

The door stood open. A gentle tap sounded.

Jo looked up. "Come in."

The young woman stood there with books in her arms. "Hi. I'm Faith Delaney."

Jo forced a smile. "Close the door and sit anywhere."

Faith did as she was told. When she sat down, she refused to look at Jo. "What am I supposed to tell you?" She rubbed her books.

It wasn't fair to ask Faith for answers. She didn't have any. Obviously. Too shy. Too quiet. Jo glanced at Tracie's notes. Too obvious.

"What class are you missing?"

"Basic science. I hope I'll pass this year."

"Is it difficult?" Basic science. That meant fifth grade level science. Not where a senior in high school should be.

"She assigns too much work. I don't have time to complete it in other classes." Faith stared at the General Science Requirements book in front of her.

"Do you have a place to do homework at home?"

Faith looked away. "My teachers watch me. They make sure I take it home. When I do, we have to leave to go sit at the hospital with mom."

"Do you want to do your homework?" Jo wanted to reach across and comfort the young woman in front of her.

"School work should be done at school. That is what mom and dad say."

Jo smiled. A logical point. Using the emergency room to prevent their daughter from doing her school work at home was a dangerous and deadly waste of resources. She glanced down at Tracie's notes. "What do you plan on doing after you finish school?"

"Do? I have to get married."

"You have to?"

"Of course. Mom and dad won't support me forever. I have to have a husband to support me."

Jo cringed. "How about supporting yourself?"

"Women can't work."

"Your teachers work."

"That isn't paid work. It's volunteer, their husbands let them do it." Hope leaned forward with a hungry look in her eye. "Maybe my husband will let me teach."

How had such misinformation made it past the 1800's?

"Faith. Your teachers, even the women, are paid to work. So am I. So are the nurses and doctors at the hospital you mom frequents."

"That can't be. Mom and dad say women exist to clean the house, and have babies. Mom didn't have enough babies, and it makes dad mad."

Jo breathed deeply and leaned back. "Do you want to be married and have babies?"

"No."

"What do you want to do?"

Faith tilted her head. "No one has ever asked me that."

"Not even a teacher?"

Faith laughed. "Sure they do. They mean at the moment. Not after school."

"Do you want to meet with the school counselor to decide what you want to do after graduation?"

"Graduation? Girls aren't allowed to graduate. My birthday is next week. After that, I won't be allowed to come to school anymore."

Jo made a note on her laptop. Critical situation. This might be the best outcome. Next week they could start to help her. "What is expected of you after you no longer come to school?"

"I'll stay home and clean house for mom until I am married."

"How do they expect you to find a husband?"

Faith looked at her. "I don't know."

A bell rang.

"I have to go back to class." Faith picked up her books and turned. "It's been nice talking to you."

"Have a good day."

Jo waited until Faith was out of the main office before leaving. Would this make it easier, or more difficult?

An hour later, she was at Lennie's office. She sat at the conference table and typed up her notes.

Lennie walked over and picked up the notes. "An odd case. What do you think?"

"If we had a male teen her age to pretend to date her. Then he could take her out of the house a few hours a day, and she could learn more about the real world."

"And study for her GED if her parents won't allow her to finish high school." Lennie touched Anne's picture.

Anne had never graduated either. Kyle Mold likely didn't allow her to complete a GED. Someone safe who could help Faith. Take her to the training, learn to drive, and choose a career.

"I closed out Nick's case today. Made me happy. Kelsey is doing well back in school."

Jo looked up. "Do you think Faith's parents care what happens to her?"

"No. They are trapped in an alternate reality. She could leave when she turns eighteen, and they might not even notice. In fact, the sooner the better."

"We can't take her now."

"If we could take her from the school, we won't lose her."

"We have to be careful. I have an idea. If we take her to the Home Track Village before she turns eighteen, she'll be safe there." Jo smiled and clicked through a few screens on her computer.

"How do we convince her parents?"

She looked up. "They want her married. We will claim to send her to a camp to find a husband."

He smiled. "Meanwhile, she will be at the village, learning what she needs to know. I like it. Hope it works."

"So do I. I need her to meet Janella. She is at Ghost Valley."

"Perfect."

"I think I will ask Bran Garber to drive her. He does have his license now?"

"Yes. A convincing young man, with his application to college, and future career in medicine. Her parents might like that. Hope they become friends." Lennie returned to his desk.

Jo breathed easier. She quickly typed out an email to Iona Glenn explaining what they were doing. It was the only solution she thought would work. If only she could help Lennie find and rescue Anne.

Rescue

A few days later, the plan was in place. Bran had been informed, and was ready to play his part. Rather more enthusiastic than necessary in fact. Jo smiled. The young man had never had a chance to date. This would be his first opportunity to talk to a woman his own age, with any real meaning. Hopefully, it led to a friendship, and nothing more.

The letter had gone to Faith's parents that she was invited to a camp to meet potential husbands. A friend of Ruby Duffy was a travel agent, and had even made a brochure with pictures of Ghost Valley, with a few of the young men now calling it home.

Jo arrived at the Delaney home to pick up Faith. She knocked on the door.

A woman opened the door.

"Hi. I'm Jo. I'm here to pick up Faith for camp."

The woman stared at her. "Faith has mentioned you. Will your husband help her with her bag?"

"I'll do it."

Ms. Delaney looked at her. "You'll hurt yourself. And your unborn babies."

Jo had to fight to laugh. She was far too old to be thinking about babies. "That's unlikely. Where is Faith?"

"She is in the kitchen. I'll show you to her bedroom to pick up her bag. Are you sure your husband won't help? He can't be a good husband then."

Better be careful what she said. "He is checking with his boss about something."

Ms. Delaney opened the door and motioned Jo through. The rooms were sparse. Shredded wall paper. A mold smell. Other signs of decay. In the tiny room Faith had slept in, when she wasn't at the hospital, sat a bookbag on the bed.

Jo picked it up. It was almost weightless. There were no items left in the room. A bed frame with no bedcovers. A dresser with three drawers. Nothing more. There was nothing to signal that a teen girl lived here.

She turned back to Ms. Delaney. "I'll talk to Faith and then we better go."

The woman nodded. "How long to find her a husband?"

"We will let you know."

"She doesn't need to come back if you don't find her one. I don't know anyone who has a young man who would make a good husband for her."

"Show me to Faith please." Jo lifted her hand to the doorframe.

Ms. Delaney led her to a tiny kitchen. The walls were in worse shape than the living room, or Faith's room. Two small chairs sat at the tiny table. Faith sat in one. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Jo waited a moment to give Ms. Delaney a chance to say goodbye to her daughter.

Ms. Delaney refused to look at Faith.

"Faith we better be going."

Ms. Delaney went to the empty chair on the other side of the kitchen. "You should have been married two years ago. I am sorry you found no one at that school you go to. I hope you find one at camp. Go now."

Jo reached out to Faith.

Faith took her hand and followed her out of the hopeless home.

In the van, Jo turned to her. "What did you pack?"

"I have three outfits."

"Anything else?"

Faith looked at her. "What else would there be? I left my books at school. I won't need them anymore."

Did Faith have any hope? "We will be at Ghost Valley. You'll meet Janella. She will help you."

"Do I have to find a husband?"

Jo smiled. "Absolutely not! There will be many men here. They will be your friends. Bran Garber will visit and help you each day along with Janella."

Faith smiled.

Release

After a month passed, Jo checked back into the reports from Janella. Faith's mother had never contacted anyone about finding her. She didn't have a phone, so there was no way to call her.

Jo drove by the house. Part of the roof had slid off. There was a For Sale sign in the yard. She knocked on the door. No one answered.

As for Faith, she was doing well. She had learned to drive. Her GED was scheduled for two weeks in the future. She would pass without problem, now that she had regular access to food and sleep. She wanted to stay at Ghost Valley and help Janella. Brenton and Carina needed a role model. Faith would help watch after them and help them with their online schoolwork. A win-win situation for everyone.

Chapter 24

Lennie - Valarie Archer - Year 15

The coffee pot percolated. Lennie sighed. No closer to finding Anne. It seemed they never would. The last call from Ruby Duffy hadn't helped. She hadn't found her two children either. If any of them were alive, they were well hidden. It was too easy to hide people, living, or otherwise, out here in the desert.

A new message popped up from Chris. Another case for him to recover.

Lenny read the notes of the case.

Case File

Focus: Valarie Archer, female, age 16
Reporter: Iona Glenn, school counselor, female, age 36
Abuser: Uncle Peter Ranchel, male, age 35
Abuse type: Emotional and Sexual
Family:
Mother - Sally Archer, female, age 38
Aunt - Mindy Ranchel, female, age 35
Uncle - Peter Ranchel, male, age 35

This young woman was suffering. The husband of her mother's cousin had abused Valarie, who was sixteen. Her mother knew, but chose to not believe it. It had been going on for many years already. Much damage had already been done to Valarie. Her mother should be charged with child abuse. Her Aunt Mindy would have to be questioned more by Chris and the detective team to determine if she knew what was going on. Valarie would be expected to stand up to them in court, even if she was able to take the remote option allowed for those living in Home Track Village.

Peter Ranchel had not been arrested. He and Mindy Ranchel had been advised to avoid the home Valarie lived in. They lived five blocks away. Peter tended to visit each afternoon as soon as

Valarie returned home from school, until moments before Valarie's mother arrived home from work.

Valarie's age didn't leave much time to save her future. By the time the courts reached her case, she'd be of legal age, and stuck in a cycle she could never break alone. She may not even think it possible to break it.

Interview

Lennie walked into the school building he had attended as a teen. It was no longer an open inviting place. Zadema, Jo, Chris, and Tracie had told him how much it had changed. He could no longer walk in the side door all the students and teachers had entered. It was locked and blocked from view.

He walked in through the large open front doors, aimed for unknown visitors. An armed guard ran a wand over him and escorted him to the office to check in.

In those days, the halls had been full of volunteer adults and students of all ages. Now, the halls were empty. Classes were loud, as teachers attempted to speak over the constant chatter of students.

The school counselor, Iona Glenn, waited for him. "Glad you could come." She ushered him to a chair.

The armed guard glanced at him and then left the office.

"Times have changed in the last ten years."

She nodded. "Not for the better."

"What more do you know about Valarie?"

"She seems a nice young woman with dreams. She has developed a mistrust of males. Students and teachers alike."

Lennie looked up at the windows. Bars covered them. Armed guards used metal detectors on students. Silence in the halls. Signs declared movement outside of class breaks against the rules. All fun pictures long gone. No event calendars posted. No chalk drawings from the sport teams. Who wouldn't be afraid?

"I have to collect college stats. Be back in a few minutes." Iona picked up her clipboard and stepped out into the hall.

Lennie watched out the window. Students couldn't see in. Had the window been a hidden mirror a decade ago? Creepy.

A bell rang.

Students clamored around Iona, shouting and laughing. So many looked excited and happy. One young man was on the verge of tears when he whispered something to Iona.

She nodded and made a note on her clipboard. In generations past, she would have been comfortable putting her arm around him in a friendly way and comforting him from whatever application he hadn't received. Today, little more than a cold smile was all she could offer a sad student who hadn't met his college dream. Although he dealt with the effects of child sexual abuse every day, he recognized the irony. Everyone needed comforting once in a while, to feel as if someone were there, really there. A light touch that meant a person wasn't alone could mean so much.

Iona laughed as she entered the office. "Most of them do well. Others never stood a chance. They aimed too high."

"Shouldn't we want them to aim high?"

"Sure. When a college accepts a few hundred students per year, not even one-tenth who apply will be admitted. It's more about realism. They apply, and shouldn't expect to get in to every choice."

"Will he try again?"

"Yesterday he received an acceptance letter to a college that will be better for him, I think. He'll be fine. Now about Valarie, she is in Algebra this hour. They have a ten-minute quiz at the beginning of class every day. She will miss the rest of the class." Iona handed him a folder with more notes. Notes from teachers.

Valarie had seemed distracted lately, by at least five teacher's reports. Not a good sign.

Iona pulled up a third chair, grabbed the tissues box, and even a washcloth and a bowl of cold water.

A tentative knock sounded at the door.

"Come in." Iona moved the clipboard and papers off her desk.

"I don’t want to interrupt a meeting." A tall, thin girl stuck her head into the room.

"Come in, this is a friend of mine. He wants to hear what you have to say about what is going on in your life."

"I wouldn’t know what to say."

"Take a seat, and I’ll begin the conversation." Iona smiled at the teen. "Valarie, how is you brother doing? Did he receive that promotion you were excited about?"

Lennie tried to look small so he wouldn't intimidate Valarie.

"Yes, he got the promotion. He is doing well. Mom is happy for him. They hope he marries well one day. Of course, he says he will never marry since our parents did not stay together."

"Really?"

"He thinks he would be happier alone than to have to worry about making another person happy."

"What do you think?"

"For him, I hope he gets over the bitterness of their divorce someday. For me, I wish I were married." Valarie cried.

Iona handed her a tissue.

Lennie shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

After a long pause filled with tears, Valarie looked at Iona, seeming to forget Lennie was in the room. "I don't know what to do. I am in trouble, and no one listens, no one helps." Here she broke into louder sobs. After more tissues, she composed herself.

"Sadly, the legal system is not as quick as it needs to be to help in these situations. We are here to listen, and hopefully improve the system so others don't have to wait as long." Lennie watched for Valarie's reaction. Her face masked her feelings.

"My mother loves her sister. Uncle Peter and Aunt Mindy helped us when my dad left. If he had known, and been able, dad would have helped mom more. We owe our lives to mom's sister. We couldn't have paid rent and electric without her help. That is how it started. Mom always said, 'Be nice to my sister and her husband for all they have done for us.' I did, and now, I am hurt, and will never heal!" The last word was more a wail than a word.

A student in the hall jumped at the sound and glanced at the office window. The student walked on.

Valarie sobbed uncontrollably this time.

Iona held the wet washcloth to her head. She waited, quietly, patiently, knowing Valarie had reached a part of the story she had never told anyone.

The young woman's tears subsided to quiet sobs, and hiccups from the effort. She reached in her pocket and pulled out a piece of folded notebook paper. She handed the paper to Iona.

Iona took the page, unfolded it, and showed a concerned face. "May I show this to Lennie?"

Valarie, glanced at her, then nodded a yes in between sobs.

Lennie took the page. The words were written in a large, shaking hand. "I was nice to him as momma asked. Now I am shamed. I am pregnant and have no idea what to do now. How does a 16-year-old confront her mother with such a thing?" The note was a diary entry that had been torn out of a journal, and had a date of two days before. What a secret to carry around. No surprise the teachers were worried about her. Valarie looked so thin, too pale. I hope she's not starving herself to abort it.

Iona motioned to Lennie, and then to the inner door. He stepped through the door.

The room was bare, except for a chair, and a table with an old rotary phone. An emergency room. He called Chris. He whispered, so as not to be heard in the other room. "Record this conversation. We have a potential suicide and/or runaway case."

"The Valarie case?"

"Yes."

"Let me check on something, hold on."

"We will have to take custody of her. I'll be there to take Valarie to the Home Track Village."

Did Valarie know how far along her pregnancy was? What were her plans? Obviously, Valarie was in fear. Lennie walked back into the main office.

Iona looked up.

He nodded.

"What can I do?" Valarie moaned.

"You need chocolate to rebuild your energy for the moment. It's almost lunch time anyway," Iona handed her another tissue. "I'll bring you chocolate, and your lunch. I will be right back."

"What would you like to do?" Lennie sat on the chair. His mind drifted to how much she reminded him of Anne. Anne had sat on her mother's porch and sobbed a similar tale to him so many years ago. She was still missing. Perhaps Valarie had a boyfriend who didn't want to lose her.

"I want most to go away somewhere and make this to have never happened," Valarie said.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Don't want one. I want to be a park ranger, and live on my own."

"That's a good goal. Which park would you like to work in?"

Valarie looked at him with happy tears in her eyes "Could I? Even like this? When could I go?"

"After you eat lunch. My friend Chris will come and take you to a nice place to rest up and start online schooling. Finish your schoolwork from there."

Iona returned with a tiny tray heaped with food.

Valarie dug into her lunch.

Iona motioned Lennie into the inner room for an update. "I will take care of everything on this end. Take that bag over there; the clothes should fit Valarie for a while. Teachers have been gathering them. I know she will be safe with you and your group."

Rescue

Lennie's phone buzzed. Chris had arrived and parked near the cafeteria loading dock.

Valarie followed Lennie into the quiet hall, out through the cafeteria next door, and through a back door to where Chris had parked.

"Go and be safe Valarie."

"Will I be able to talk to mom?"

"Jo will let me know when you arrive. We will have to talk to your mom. She might not be happy. This is best for you."

Her tear streaked face nodded. She shuffled into the back seat of Chris's patrol car.

Chris rolled down his window. "I asked Zadema to ride with us. It's Friday, and she wanted to spend the weekend there anyway."

Zadema ran out the door with her bookbag. "If they find out we're gone, we'll be in trouble. Hurry." She jumped in beside Valarie and slammed the door.

Valarie giggled.

Lennie stepped back inside the school kitchen. A few of the cooks looked his way. One smiled. He quickly left the building in the proper legal manner. With armed guard escort.

Release

Valarie arrived at the Home Track Village. Her progress notes said she was doing well. She settled into an online school program to complete her high school degree. She received counseling, and medical care to determine whether the pregnancy should continue.

Her mother did not accept the truth. She called the police every single day demanding her daughter be returned. She refused to believe what had happened. Ms. Archer claimed her daughter's medical reports had been falsified.

A few weeks later, the fetus DNA test proved Valarie was the mother, and her uncle, Peter Ranchel, was the infant's father. Even that wasn't enough to convince Ms. Sally Archer.

The trial was scheduled. It would be two years before the courts could try this uncle of Valarie's for sex abuse of a teen. In two years, Valarie would graduate from online high school. She would turn eighteen, and be able to safely leave the Home Track Village if she desired without her mother being able to stop her.

Two years. Her status would change from legal child to legal adult. If the baby had been born, it would be a year old and expected to have regular visitation rights with its father. Which would violate Ruby's law.

Valarie had decided she did not want to spend the rest of her life chained to her abuser. Uncle Peter Ranchel would never meet the child he had forced on her. After the abortion, Valarie held a private funeral ceremony outside the village. A few women, including Jo, had gone along to comfort her.

Best answer for all. The child would not grow up confused as to why he or she would not have parents living together. Or grow up adopted, and wondering who his or her parents actually were. Or, why they didn't want the child they created together.

Lennie sighed as he read his report notes. Anne would never have given up her child. Did she now wish she had? If Ruby had escaped Liam and given up her children before birth, would Ruby's Law even exist? What kind of life were those three children living now? If they were living at all. Anne may have even had more children. If she survived the pregnancy.

Chapter 25

Jo - Melissa Savana - Year 15

Something Ashley Chardell said haunted Jo. How many other people had Pastor Stork harmed? Something she had never done before became important. As if there wasn't enough work to do, Janella agreed. She would make an effort to determine the safety of those this man had constant contact with.

The church parking lot was across from a low-cost grocery store. Both were mostly empty at the moment. That would change in about half an hour. The church maintained a food pantry for the poor. They were also having a sleeping bag and blanket drive for the winter. Not as necessary as the coat drives up north, although vital to the lives of those whom society had forgotten. So many whom through no fault of their own had lost homes, family, jobs, purpose, and hope.

Interview

A young woman walked out of the store with an arm load of bags. She didn't go to a car. She kept walking across the street to the church.

Jo took a deep breath before she drove across the street. This would scare her as much as the young woman. After parking, she caught up with the woman as she opened a tiny side door.

"May I help you?"

The woman smiled back at her. She peeked back at the white van. "We don't start handing out food for an hour."

"I will help you prepare. What do you need done?"

The woman glanced around. "I don't know you. And we are supposed to run criminal background checks on helpers."

Jo nodded. "I'll show you my id." As if background checks would catch those who were borderline abusers, or whom had blinded their victims to their abuse. She pulled out her Underground Railroad badge, which was now an official government badge. The

Underground Railroad had been decided as the all-encompassing name for the locations. It worked well.

The woman glanced at the official id. She handed Jo a bag. "I'm Melissa Savana. Welcome. Is this your first food pantry day?"

"Yes. Thought I would find out how those less fortunate manage." While the statement was true, the sentiment for those who were less fortunate remained to be observed.

They reached a room that was little more than a closet with shelves lined with food. "Sort them." Melissa sat down on a chair outside the room. "I'll print the lists in a minute. We have to sort the bags for those who pick up the food."

Jo placed a can of green beans behind another of a different brand. "Don't they choose what they need?"

Melissa laughed. "No. They receive what they are given. Imagine the chaos if we took orders and gave them what they asked for?" She struggled to stand.

"What about food allergies and families who need a few helper items?"

"Doesn't work that way. Might be better if it did. If we are caught paying attention to food allergies and such for one person, we have to do it for all. I'll be right back." She walked down the hallway.

Jo finished emptying the bags. It didn't take long. Peas, carrots, green beans, a few cans of tuna and chicken. Enough for a meal or two for a family. And bread. Lots of bread. Enough bread for dozens of families.

Melissa returned with a printed list and a dozen paper bags. "Here you go. Fill each bag from the list."

Jo took the list. One can of each vegetable, and one can of tuna or chicken, and four loaves of bread per family for a week. Not healthy at all. Certainly not brain food. "How many families come?"

"We have about three regulars. And four or five that come every few weeks. Some go to other churches in the area for more variety." She sat back in the chair.

Jo filled the bags. It took about five minutes to fill all twelve bags. "Does anyone help you?"

"No. This will be my last time."

"Why is that?"

"Pastor Stork doesn't like that I want to leave my husband. Says it isn't right. Says if I have a baby, my husband will stop using illegal drugs and his alcoholism will disappear overnight."

Jo hid a laugh. She had heard that before. "Does he say that to many people?"

Melissa nodded. "Lots. The women always have babies, and they stay with their husbands. Even when they beat them. I'm scared of my husband. Even if he says I should fear my husband, I don't think I should."

There was a dash of hope in this young woman. No woman should fear anyone. No person should fear another person. Only wild animals. "Fear isn't a healthy emotion. A dangerous one on which to build a family."

"I messed up. I forgot to refill my prescription, and now I am pregnant."

Jo closed her eyes. At least she had taken birth control until she knew the truth. "What are your plans?"

"Don't know. I don't want to stay. I don't have anywhere to go. I don't want the baby to grow up here." Melissa sneezed.

"Have you told anyone?"

"No. No one would understand."

"I do. After this, why don't you come with me for a while. We will eat and talk." Better to talk in a place where Pastor Stork might not appear.

"I better go open the door now. Are the food bags ready?"

"Yes." Jo pushed them toward her.

Case File

Focus: Melissa Savana, female, age 25
Reporter: Jo Forester, female, age 33
Abuser: Pastor Stork, male, age 50
Abuse type: Emotional and Sexual
Family:
Husband - Vernel Savana, male, age 24
Unborn Child

Melissa smiled as she walked off. She was back in a few minutes with one older woman who walked with a cane.

The woman toddled up to Jo. "Glad she has a helper. It's hard work."

Jo handed her a bag. "Do you have other needs?"

"No. Pastor Stork will be around to see me this afternoon. He helps me put my food away."

I imagine he does. "Have a good day."

The woman toddled off.

A few minutes later a young man, maybe sixteen walked down the hall. "I'm here for the bag for my mother today."

Melissa smiled at him. "Here you go."

He took the bag and took a few steps toward the door. "Will you be going on the missionary trip?"

"No."

"It'd be good for you." He walked on toward the door.

Melissa shuddered.

Jo could read between the lines. Much was happening here that wasn't spoken. Or, only partially spoken.

Soon, all the bags had been collected.

Melissa closed the closet room.

Rescue

"Where is your car?"

"I don't drive. Don't have the money for a car."

"Where's home?"

Melissa hid her eyes. "A tiny apartment three miles from here."

"Then how do you get here?"

"I walk."

"You walk more than six miles a day to come here?"

She nodded. "Several of us do."

"Come on." Jo opened the passenger van door. "We need to eat."

Melissa stepped up into the van.

Jo drove to a little diner she knew. There, they could eat their fill and talk in relative peace.

Melissa stared at the amount of food heaped up on the bar. "I've never seen so much food outside of a potluck."

Jo smiled. "Eat your fill. I have to grocery shop on the way home, and don't want to do so if I'm hungry."

"How many do you shop for?" Melissa piled vegetables on her plate.

"Leave room for the meat." Jo nodded to the next table piled with turkey, pork, ham, sausage, sauerkraut, and scrambled burger.

"Meat? Is that included?"

"Yes. To answer your question, I shop for about two hundred people."

Melissa's plate dropped and dumped cooked carrots into a vat of mashed potatoes. "That many people? You must buy a car load of vegetables."

"We do eat vegetables. And meat is vital to rebuild brain matter, concentration, and thinking patterns."

"Is it a school?"

"For some. A recovery place. Finish filling your plate."

Before long, they had sat at the table and ate. Jo returned for a second plate heaped with food.

"We can have more than one plate?"

Jo nodded.

Melissa returned with a plate filled with roast beef, potatoes, and gravy. "I've never eaten so much. I've eaten almost a week's worth of food."

"Do you have to walk to grocery shop?"

Melissa nodded as she swallowed. "If I can't carry it, I don't buy it."

Jo finished her plate. Normally, she'd go back for dessert. Not today. Today, there were more important things to worry about. "Tell me about these missionary trips."

Melissa closed her eyes. "Pastor Stork goes. Women without children who are married always come back pregnant. It's supposed to be for the teens and young adults. It makes me feel creepy and dirty, and hot in a bad way to think about. I haven't gone in a few years."

"Do you have a phone?"

"No. Can't afford it."

"Do you have power and running water?"

"Part of the time. My husband tends to spend the bills money on things I won't say here in this nice place."

"Is your husband home?"

"No. He's on a two-week vacation. He wanted to go to Disneyland. I took the money from my last job and gave it to him so he could go. I'll go back to work tomorrow and beg for enough to pay the rent."

"Does he work?"

"No. He's a man. He doesn't have to."

"Would you like to help me grocery shop?" Jo pushed her plate back.

"It'll make me hungry. Not sure when I'll have enough money for food."

"With a baby on the way, you need to eat regularly."

"I don't think Pastor Stork cares about that."

"He should. It won't do any good to bring unhealthy babies into the world."

Melissa took one last bite and pushed her now empty plate between them. "I can go with you?"

"You may come stay with me if you like."

"I wish I could disappear. One woman did. He said she was dead."

Jo took a deep breath. "What was her name?" Had others tried to escape?

"Ashley Chardell. She tried to help me."

Jo smiled. "She'd not dead. Would you like to see her?"

Melissa nodded.

"If you come with me, you won't be able to return for a long time. Is there anything you need from your apartment?"

"I have a blanket I would miss. My grandmother made it."

Jo held out her hand. "Let's go pick it up, and then we will go grocery shopping."

An hour later, Melissa had packed a few clothes and a few blankets into two laundry baskets. "If we go like this, people will think I am going out to wash the laundry."

"Is there anything else you wish to keep?" Jo viewed the dilapidated apartment. Holes in the walls. No pictures. No regular furniture. Nothing to call home.

Melissa didn't glance back. "No. This is all. He sold everything I had of value for his drugs and alcohol."

Release

Melissa settled in with Ashley. She could technically leave anytime, they both could. Neither wanted to meet Pastor Stork, or any of the others in the church they had known. They planned to raise Mabel Viola and Melissa's child together, without the father knowing he had a child. It was sad, he had never even returned to the apartment, or reported Melissa missing.

Melissa's child was wanted. There would be no genetic stress markers, no fear of the father of the child, and few unwelcome genetic issues. Other than the possibility of addiction. Which could be addressed with training.

Jo checked her social media accounts. She tracked down Melissa's husband. He had posted photos of himself in Florida with another woman swimming in the ocean together. From his online comments, Vernel Savana never intended to return to his wife and unborn child.

Chapter 26

Lennie - Quibben Wilten - Year 15

Lennie turned his car into the hospital parking lot. This case was heart breaking. Chris would be waiting for him at the emergency room door. Each situation like this made his life more difficult. He couldn't ignore the multi-generational effects of the abuse. And the way it affected the community around them.

Quibben Wilten would be recognized by the law as a teen boy, even at the age of seventeen. One who should be kept safe from harm. He had harmed his own body beyond normal recognition. Alcohol poisoning, and a toxic drug cocktail that was being determined at the moment.

From Chris's text, the parents would be there. Were they innocent bystanders, or participants? Too frequently, they were participants. This morning he had attended a funeral of a younger teen who had died at the hands of his grandmother's medications. They kept her alive. And killed him. She didn't know he was taking them. At first, one or two pills a month disappeared. Then more. Both drugs and alcohol meant that wasn't the case here.

Case File

Focus: Quibben Wilten, male, age 17
Reporter: Chris Stoney, male, age 33
Abuser: Father - Weston Wilton, male, age 45
Abuse type: Physical and Sexual
Family:
Father - Weston Wilten, male, age 45
Mother - Priscillian Wilten, female, age 42

Interview

Lennie parked the car and walked up to the emergency room. Chris waited a few feet from the revolving door.

"Hi Chris."

Chris turned. "Something's odd here. More than my report gave you. Can't speak about it out here."

"Do I need to know before we go in?"

Chris nodded. "Let's go to your car. You have the silent sound system?"

Lennie turned back to his car. "When did the young man arrive?"

"He was brought in about two hours ago. They aren't sure if he will survive." Chris did not speak until they were inside the car with the silent sound system on. "Something is wrong with his mother, Priscillian Wilten."

"Priscillian? Imagine the taunting she received as a child. Many adults couldn't even pronounce her name correctly."

"We know what that leads to. Her husband, Weston, calls her Silly. She doesn't call him by a nickname."

Lennie shifted in his seat. "That isn't nice."

"No." Chris looked straight at him. "Something about the defeated look in her eyes. She won't even reach out to touch her son's hand. Or even look at him. She stares at the floor. Her shoulders droop so low, she can touch her knees without bending."

Lennie closed his eyes. Definitely not normal. "Anything else?"

"Unsure. A nagging feeling. If Priscillian were a teen, I'd check her medical history." Chris opened the door and stepped out.

Lennie shut down the sound system before following.

Inside the hospital, Chris led him to an emergency room bay.

The body on the bed was as pale as the sheets over and under him. A little beard stubble was the only sign that the form was a male. Otherwise, the gender would be indiscernible.

A man stood with his legs wide, by the head of the bed and shook the young man's pillow.

A woman stood beside him, staring at the floor.

"Quibben. Wake up. You are needed at home."

The woman did not move or look up.

"Silly, wake up your son."

She turned away. Her glance ended on Lennie. She touched the arm of the man beside her.

The man grunted. "Wake him. Not me."

"Weston."

The man looked up. "Oh, it's you. Why did you bring someone with you?" He glared at Chris.

Chris widened his stance. "By law, I have to because Quibben is under age eighteen. This is Lennie Darendale. He will ask you a few questions."

"We won't answer." Weston kicked his wife in the shin.

She grabbed the bed to keep from falling. Her face turned away from the young pale form on the bed.

"We have nothing to say to you. He will wake up and we will take him home. I've been off work an hour. I need my son at home."

Lennie sighed. This could be a long day.

An hour of circling with Weston had given no answers. Priscillian hadn't spoken. Tears dribbled from her eyes, rolled down her nose, and dripped to stain the sheets.

It was not normal. The man ranted on, getting more aggressive every moment. His wife withdrew more and more. This case needed Tracie's words to the wife and mother. She wasn't available.

The doctors ordered Chris to remove the man from the emergency room. He did not go willingly.

Priscillian remained. She hunched into a corner and did not look at the unconscious body on the bed.

"Priscillian. Will you speak to me?"

She shook her head.

"Is Quibben your son?"

She nodded and turned to face the wall.

"I have a friend named Tracie. Would you talk to her?"

She did not move at all. As if she did not hear him.

He turned to walk away.

One of the nurses walked into the room. "Hi, I'm Eliza Ruff. May I speak with you?"

Lennie glanced at the silent woman. Nothing he said would convince her to speak.

He followed the nurse to a tiny room where doctors gave diagnosis to patient families.

She stood against the wall and motioned for him to sit. "This isn't the first time they have been here. Quibben is in bad shape. Without help, he will be dead."

"I haven't been called before."

She nodded. "We have called other agencies. None showed up."

"I'll do what I am able to."

The nurse waited.

"What about Priscillian?"

"We don't know. Something is wrong with her. Get her out of that house and family if you want her to live." The nurse stormed out of the room.

Lennie stared at the open door.

A few days later, Lennie received a text from Chris. Quibben had been released from the hospital and then brought back. This time, the father was arrested for violent behavior at the hospital. Tracie was there with Priscillian.

Lennie rushed to the hospital to join them.

This time, the nurse, Eliza Ruff, escorted him into a small waiting room where Tracie and Chris sat with Priscillian.

He took the empty chair.

Tracie glanced at him. "Tell us what happened in the room."

Priscillian turned away. "No. I cannot speak."

"Who are you protecting? Your son. Or your husband?" Tracie leaned closer to her.

She pulled away and muttered under her breath.

Lennie leaned closer. "Will you write it down?"

She shook her head.

Rescue

Tracie sighed. "Lennie, let's step into the next room."

Once there Tracie stood next to his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "The nurses said they heard something disturbing. Weston Wilten demands that his son, Quibben Wilten have sex with Priscillian, and then he has sex with her."

Lennie stared at the wall. No woman would want to speak of such atrocities against her body.

"How long has this gone on?"

"Since he was a little boy."

Quibben was into drugs and alcohol. There was little hope that he would recover. Even if removed from the home. The circumstances were against him.

"It is obvious Priscillian does not want to be part of this. She is a first level victim. Her son is second level. We can't let him out in society. He will carry this on." Tracie stepped away and leaned against a wall. "I've seen and heard many stories. None as bad as what I heard from those nurses."

"Is it true?" Occasionally nurses mis-heard, or misunderstood, what people were saying.

Tracie nodded. "It's all on the security camera."

Of course. Now what would happen? "I need to talk to Chris about Priscillian."

"I want to take her to my shelter. She will be safest there. She isn't mentally ready for the Home Track Village."

"Can we legally do that?"

"Yes. Priscillian won't be out of state. She won't be arrested. She will have to go to trial."

"And Quibben?"

"Due to his drug use, he needs to be locked in a substance abuse recovery program. One for men. We can't help him."

Lennie nodded. He stepped out of the room. He leaned against the wall. The chill in the cold painted concrete eased the pressure building inside his head. It was a plan. They would be safe for the moment. Eventually, Jo could help Priscillian start a new life. Quibben would be another program's client.

Lennie stepped into the room where Priscillian and Chris sat.

She stared at the wall over Chris's head.

Chris stood up. "I'll speak to Tracie and then send her in."

Lennie sat down. "Would you like to see Quibben?"

"No. Please. Don't make me."

"I won't. Do you have memories of better times?"

"Few. Before he was born. Before Weston changed."

"What changed him?"

"I wish I knew." She covered her face and cried. "Don't send me to jail."

Lennie wanted to comfort her. That might hurt or scare her more. "Tracie will take you to a safe place." He couldn't promise she would never go to jail.

"Take care of my son. He doesn't deserve this."

Tracie closed the door gently. "And neither do you. When your tears dry, I will take you with me. Your son will be safe."

Lennie stepped out of the room and closed the door. A set of events he had little control over. Nothing he could do for this shattered family.

Nurse Eliza Ruff walked up to him. "Would you like to see the boy?"

"Is the young man awake?"

She stared at him. "He is a boy."

"No. He is not. He is days away from full adulthood. He is an adult. With adult problems. Problems that were placed on him when he was a young boy."

The nurse led the way to the emergency room bay where Quibben Wilten slept.

His face was pasty pale. His chest moved the sheet up and down. A fraction of what it should. Machines beeped, sharing his vital statistics for those who could comprehend the strings of sound, numbers, and acronyms.

A doctor stepped into the room. "We have the results from his lab work from his last visit. It isn't good." He listed the drugs that had been in Quibben's system.

Lennie closed his eyes. The young man wanted to die. From the looks of the nurse and doctor, death would be the option best for him. Even his own mother could no longer look at him and what he had become. It would release her as well if he died.

"There is little hope?"

"He isn't expected to live this time. He almost didn't last time."

Lennie stared at the young man. Such a loss of life. The teen's chest didn't rise and fall enough to be noticed. What had made his father, Weston Wilten, do this to the two people he should have most wanted to protect in all the world?

"Does he have any other family?"

"Unknown. No one speaks of other family. No one comes to see him other than his parents. He has been here many times." The

doctor's pager went off. "Have to go. I may be able to save this patient."

Release

Lennie sat beside Quibben Wilten. If the young man held on a few more days, he would make it to adulthood.

Chris couldn't hold his father in jail that long. And with Priscillian gone, when his father returned home, Quibben would be in danger.

Quibben's chest rose higher than before. He exhaled.

Lennie reached up and touched Quibben's hand. "I'm here. Don't fear."

His eyes opened and turned to Lennie. He blinked. Then stared.

The machine beeps changed. Louder and faster.

Nurses rushed into the room and gathered around, busying themselves with the machines and equipment.

The machines made one final long pulse.

The nurses turned away.

The hand he held went limp. The skin began to cool. At the same time, color crept back into the skin.

In many societies Priscillian's secret need never be told. There would have to be a court trial because of the security camera report. She would suffer through the case. Then, be sent to a place to recover.

Chapter 27

Jo - Trina Ruff - Year 16

Jo met Cousin Nani plan musical training for the Home Track Village. "Come back when you need more music or instruments."

Jo and Melissa left the Deserted Forest. The drive back to the Home Track Village would give them plenty of time to have a practice singing session tonight.

Melissa went into the small grocery store for a few items she would need for her unborn baby.

Jo looked through the music programs Cousin Nani had given them. Several easy to sing songs, a few medium difficulty, and one that might be more difficult.

Melissa returned leading a young woman.

Jo closed her laptop. Music would have to wait.

Melissa knocked on the window.

Jo rolled down the window.

"I'd like you to talk to Trina. Do we have time?"

Without a glance, Jo nodded. Time was something they would make if it was important.

Melissa and Trina stepped into the van.

"Let's go to Lennie's office. Do you need to be anywhere at a specific time?" Jo turned the van on.

"No. How far is Lennie's office?" Melissa buckled her seat belt.

"A few blocks. I will bring you back here."

"Okay."

At Lennie's, the three women went inside.

Jo knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Jo ushered them inside.

Trina sat in the chair furthest from the door.

Lennie turned on the coffee pot. "What may I do for you ladies?"

"Coffee will be fine." Jo closed the door and sat down.

Melissa grabbed Trina's hand. "I met Trina today. She needs to share her story."

Trina turned away.

"Do you like coffee?"

Trina nodded. "Can't have any with the baby."

Lennie handed a cup to Jo. "Where is your baby?"

"My boyfriend is watching him."

Jo took a deep breath. What had Melissa heard that made her bring Trina along? "Trina are you comfortable talking in front of Lennie?"

The young woman trembled. "Don't take my baby."

"That's not what we do." Lennie leaned back. "Jo will help you if you need help."

"Melissa said she would. I don't want to leave my boyfriend."

"Does your boyfriend treat you good?"

"Yes. Melissa will tell you what I told her." Trina hid her eyes.

Lennie turned to Melissa Savana.

Jo glanced at both women. Events like this were never easy.

Melissa ignored Lennie, and turned to Jo. "The baby is not her boyfriend's. It is her brother's."

"Okay."

"Her mother is a nurse and is never home. They lived in a two-bedroom house. She has shared a bedroom with her brother since she was an infant. After she found out she was pregnant, her boyfriend convinced her to move in with him and his family."

"Aunt Octalana called me today, said my brother cried for days after the baby was born because I won't go home to take care of him."

Case File

Focus: Trina Ruff, female, age 18
Reporter: Melissa Savana, female, age 25
Abuser: Brother - Vinny Ruff, male, age 16
Abuse type: Sexual
Family:
Mother - Eliza Ruff, female, age 44
Brother - Vinny Ruff, male, age 16
Aunt - Octalana Ruff, female, age 50
Boyfriend - Hamilton Jenks, male, age 18

Interview

Jo cringed. This was unusual in Arizona or New Mexico. Not unusual in communities where families had lived bundled into single rooms for generations.

"I don't want to go back. Mom and Aunt Octalana don't understand why I don't visit."

"Of course they don't." Lennie said. "Does the baby have good medical care?"

She nodded. "He seems okay. I know he could have problems later, that we can't see now. Hamilton wants me to take him to a geneticist. I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Jo leaned toward her.

"That my brother will take the baby since it's his."

Lennie's hands shook.

Jo knew what that meant. In some cases, Lennie would gladly return a child to his father. This wouldn't be one of them.

"Are you afraid of anything else?"

"That Hamilton will give up on me if I can't have a real baby."

"A real baby?"

"One that isn't a brother/sister baby."

Lennie waved his right hand at Jo. It was up to her to ask the questions as he typed in the notes. This case had to be reported and investigated.

"Trina, what is your full name?"

"Trina Ruff. My mom is Eliza and my aunt is Octalana. My brother's name is Vinny." She wiped a tear off her nose.

Lennie stopped typing and stared. His face paled. "Where is your mom a nurse at?"

"She's at the big hospital in Albuquerque. She stays there when she works. It's twelve hour days for six days, then two days off. She comes home then, and sleeps those two days. We never saw her."

Lennie closed his eyes.

Jo glanced at Lennie. Something was wrong. "Trina, who was at home with you growing up?"

"Aunt Octalana was there when we'd return home from school. She'd have a dinner fixed, then go home to her house, leaving us there alone. That wasn't right either, was it?"

"After you were both age sixteen, maybe. Not all night. And not for years." He poured another cup of coffee into his cup.

"I don't want mom to be in trouble. She did all she could to take care of us after dad died. I was two when he died. Vinny wasn't even born." Trina hid her head in her hands.

Was there even anything Lennie should do legally? Trina was eighteen now. Although, her mother should be held accountable for what happened.

"Trina, Lennie will need to speak to your mom and your aunt since they raised you. They must be held accountable for what happened. Do they know the child is your brother's and not Hamilton's?"

"I've told them. They don't believe me. They say it isn't possible. They keep saying brothers and sisters always share a bedroom. I don't like it. Never did. Mom should have let me have her room since she was never there."

"Are you safe from your family at Hamilton's?"

"Yes. He doesn't want me to contact them. Especially after." She clapped her hand over her mouth.

Melissa touched her hand.

"After what?"

Trina turned to Jo. "I found packets of pills with different people's names on them in her room a few days before I left home."

"Who did they belong to?"

"I don't know. I checked the names of the pills. There were sleeping pills, and pills to keep you awake. I know she works twelve to fifteen hours a day. Without even a restroom break."

Jo closed her eyes. The brother was a child sex offender, and the mother a drug using nurse. Not good at all.

"Trina, do you promise to have no contact with your family?" Lennie tapped notes into his computer.

"Yes."

"Jo take her home. Give her your card. Trina, you are to call Jo, myself, or Chris instantly if either your mom, aunt, or brother contact you. Do you understand?" He handed her two cards.

She nodded and accepted them. "Will I have to go to court?"

"We will make it as easy on you as possible. I am sorry. This is no way for you to enter your adult years. And yes, take Hamilton's advice and take the child to a geneticist."

Jo stood up and opened the door. "We better go."

Melissa led Trina out of the room.

Jo glanced back at Lennie.

"Call me later." He turned back to his laptop.

She gently closed the door. He knew something about this case.

Rescue

Lennie's words echoed into Jo's consciousness. Trina's mother was a drug using nurse who didn't recognize that her children were grown up. Or that teens were not the same as toddlers. As a nurse, she should have known better. Two decades of overworking, and not raising her children, had made her forget all she had once known.

Chris contacted the hospital where Eliza Ruff worked. Within a week, they had arrested her.

Vinny Ruff cried himself to sleep every night because his sister wasn't there to keep him warm and safe.

Hearing Octalana say that disturbed Jo. Octalana showed no emotion when she said it.

Jo stared at the woman. This teen's aunt. Trina's aunt. The one their mother had trusted to take care of them.

"It's normal for siblings to share a room."

"It's illegal for a boy and a girl to share a bedroom. For this reason. Unwanted babies occur when the brothers force themselves on their sisters."

"Don't be silly. Vinny would never do that."

Jo turned to Vinny. "Did you have sex with your sister?"

He nodded. A tear dripped down his nose. "I love her. She can't leave me for someone else."

"Vinny. That is not okay. A brother and sister should never have sex. And never see each other unclothed. It is illegal. A baby born of a brother and sister will have serious health complications. When did this start?"

He stared at her. "I don't know. She bathed me when I was a baby, then as I grew up. Mom wasn't here to do it. I'd watch her

undress at night. I woke up one night a few years ago and reached out and touched her. I didn't wake her. I thought it was special."

Chris shuffled beside Jo.

Jo knew his thoughts turned to Zadema. His niece, whom he would protect no matter what.

"Vinny. You will not be allowed to see your sister. She has a life-long restraining order against you. Do you understand what that means?" Chris leaned forward.

The teen shook his head.

"You may not call, text, email, or in any way attempt to locate, or communicate with your sister. As long as you both shall live."

Vinny's eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped.

"You will be sent to a special school for a year or two."

"What about mom? Can't I let her know how mom is? They took mom away."

"No. Your mom is in jail, and will remain there for at least ten years. What we will do, is this. There is going to be a program created for people on restraining order lists. Think of it as a relay station. If there is something that is a life or death matter that your sister needs to know, you will be able to present it to the relay station, and if they determine that it is okay for her to know, they will relay it to her."

"What would be okay to relay?"

"Genetic testing disorders, a family death. Things like that. The relay station will be able to pass the message along. They will read it, and make any warranted adjustments."

"I'll be able to contact her for you." Octalana smiled and patted his hand. "I'll bring your sister back home to you."

Chris stared at her. "The restraining order includes you. You will have no contact with your niece. In fact, until you have been through basic legally required training, you will be barred from access to those under the age of eighteen outside of the presence of another adult."

Octalana stared. "You can't do that. I have three small children."

"No Octalana. You do not have three small children. You have three teenaged young adults. Two young women and one young man. Surprisingly, they appear to be mentally and physically

healthy. They will be in a foster home until you prove to be a fit parent." Jo watched her.

Octalana's face reddened as if it would explode.

Vinny cried. "I've lost everyone."

Octalana pounded her fist. "You've destroyed my family."

"No." Jo leaned forward. "I do not know why you believe what you do. I think deep down; you know the truth. Once you recognize it, you will begin to heal. Trina has chosen to be gone from your lives forever. For her safety, and the safety of her child. Please grant her the health and happiness you have taken, as her childhood was lost."

A tear dropped down Octalana's nose. "I tried."

"No doubt, you did the best you could. Come Vinny. I'll help you pack a few clothes." Chris held out his hand.

"I have to go now?"

"Yes."

"One last hug?" Octalana held out her arms.

The teen ran into them and hid his face in her chest. He was taller than she was. He gripped her back as if he were her husband rather than her nephew.

Jo and Chris looked away. This goodbye was disturbing.

Release

Jo read over the notes of Trina Ruff's case. It had been a year since that day Melissa found her sobbing in a grocery store in Carrizozo.

Trina Ruff had taken her baby, and moved with Hamilton to another state. The baby did have a couple of potential rare genetic disorders that may show up later in life. At this point, he remained healthy. They had also decided to have a baby of their own. They were expecting twins. Three infants for them to raise.

Eliza Ruff had been sentenced to ten years in prison for drug theft and drug abuse. She had requested that an apology letter be sent to her daughter. Although she didn't know it, and never would, Trina had cried when she read the letter. She could forgive her mother. She couldn't feel safe being around her.

Vinny Ruff had failed in the special school he had been sent to. There were no women there. His desire for intimacy had not been

met. It was an addiction. He could only focus and communicate when he was in direct contact with a female he cared for. Upon his release, a few days before his eighteenth birthday, he had returned to the home of his aunt. He hadn't been known to leave it since.

Aunt Octalana never changed her mind about any of what had happened. She continued to state that she would allow mixed gender siblings to sleep together at any age. Her own children begged to stay in the foster care homes they had been referred to.

Not an ending Jo had wanted to see. Most would do well. Vinny would end up in jail eventually, when a woman turned him in for abuse. Unless he found someone like his aunt who had only known abuse, and thought it was normal.

Chapter 28

Lennie - Lacey Hanley - Year 16

Lennie pulled up his next case. All the cases ran together these days. Too many teen sex abuse cases. Chris sent him another one today.

Lennie drove to the school to meet with Iona Glenn. He had met with her far too many times over the years. For each battle won for the rights of one teen, a dozen more could be fought. The end to abuse of others hadn't stopped.

Even though his own teachers had insisted that ignoring bullies made them go away. It hadn't. It silenced victims. Now, their victims had continued victimizing to the point he was meeting the children of the teens who had been bullied in this high school when he was a student there. All of them were victims of the children of the bullies he had known. And like a good student, he had ignored, and ran from them.

Today, teachers were beginning to understand history and literature. Ignoring bullies gave them the freedom to continue bullying. It didn't make them stop. It condoned the abuse. People couldn't run away from bullies all their lives. One day, they had to stand up. Teachers didn't know how to teach generational victims to overcome their fear, and stand up for themselves. They themselves had been the victims of the bullies. Often, they still were.

Case File

Focus: Lacey Hanley, female, age 16

Reporter: Iona Glenn, school counselor, female, age 36

Abuser: Cousin - Berteeno Cannon, male, age 18 and guest - Tatten Anveil, drifter, male age 65

Abuse type: Sexual

Family:

Mother - Pandora Hanley - middle school teacher, female, age 40

Father - Gilbert Hanley - truck driver, male, age 42

Cousin - Berteeno Cannon, male, age 18

Interview

Iona sat in the interview room chair.

It seemed Lennie was here every few days now. Far more than he wanted to be. He was sure Iona didn't want to be here either. "Who are we helping today?"

"A sixteen-year-old named Lacey Hanley. Shocking case. Internal and external abuse. I keep hoping someday it'll be the parent coming to me and trying to fix an issue. It hasn't happened." Iona shuffled her papers.

"Are you sure you want that? An angry mother may show up saying a young woman seduced her son. That may be even more difficult to explain to her."

Iona laughed. "You are right about that. This case. How could the parents not know what is happening? A middle school teacher for a mom. The truck driver dad. It's almost stereotypical. Even if it makes no sense."

"Like Ms. Ruff who didn't realize how old her own son was. Or that her daughter was of legal age. All part of the always at work mentality today. People are not able to spend enough time with their families to recognize they are growing up, and getting old before their eyes."

"Separation often makes the age change more apparent."

"Not always. If I find Anne, will I expect her to be the same as she was when I last saw her at age eighteen? Realistically, I know she won't be. I am afraid I will think of her as my delicate girlfriend who must be shielded from all danger. Including that awful Kyle Mold, even though she wants to be with him for all the wrong reasons."

Iona looked up at him. "Sure you are up to this today?"

"She's in danger. Doesn't matter if I am up to it or not."

"It matters. She's been there a while. It isn't going to change in a hurry. Let's have a cup of tea before we meet Lacey."

Lennie nodded. It wasn't like him to let out his true feelings about missing Anne. His fear of never finding her seemed to be growing. As if she were a shadow, out of reach around the edge of his sight. Warm tea was a pleasant distraction from the mundane

while he read the teacher's notes in this case. Two parents, a male cousin, and a male tramp lived in the three-bedroom home with Lacey. "Has Chris checked out this tramp?"

Iona nodded. "Looking at the reports right now. The fax arrived while I was heating the tea." Her hands shook as she handed them over.

The tramp, Tatten Anveil, was a convicted animal abuser. At least a dozen dogs, and two horses found emaciated in his care. A registered child sex offender, having assaulted both male and female children as young as four years old. A registered sex offender. Three known adult rape cases. Convicted murderer, of two women, suspected prostitutes, and a man. And he had defaced a contested Native American ancestral monument in the Grand Canyon. The list of smaller crimes was truncated with a note that it spanned five hundred separate cases over a forty-year period.

"Did the parents never ask where he was from, or anything about him?" Lennie dropped the papers on the table. "This cannot be good for my blood pressure."

Iona's face paled as much as the paper. "Chris says she cannot go home tonight. We don't have a choice. We have to tell her."

Lennie took a gulp of the tea. "We will. She must go to the hospital for testing for every known sexually transmitted disease. This predator should never have been allowed near their home."

"The cousin, Berteeno Cannon, could be in danger as well."

"He's eighteen. And has abused Lacey himself."

"How long has Tatten Anveil been there?"

Lennie sighed. Berteeno could be a victim of Tatten's as well. "I'll see what Chris can do. He knows a few tricks."

"Nothing illegal I hope."

Lennie laughed. "Chris? Illegal? No. He has been known to arrest for protection once or twice. It has saved at least one life so far. Since Berteeno is eighteen and accused, sending him to jail for his own protection could be the best choice. If a lawyer agrees he is more victim than abuser, he may be able to go to Ghost Valley to recover. Janella would teach him a thing or two."

"That would work."

"Perhaps. Don't count on it. Men have to be safe to go there, not a risk of predation on others."

A knock at the door interrupted them.

"Come in." Iona pulled all the papers to her and covered them.

A young woman walked in. "Am I early?"

Rescue

"Hi Lacey, you are right on time. This is Lennie. He is here to hear your story."

Iona glanced at him.

He gave a tiny nod. They'd listen to her story. Then tell her the plan.

Lacey sat down as far from Lennie as she could.

Lennie sighed. Jo should have been here. The young woman might be more comfortable.

Iona looked at Lacey. "Tell us what happened."

Lacey glanced at Lennie, then at the table. "Cousin Berteeno has lived with my parents since before I was born. He never was normal. An odd cousin. Stared at me."

Lennie watched her. There was something she wasn't saying.

"Dad was away too much. As a truck driver, he is only home occasionally. They found Tatten Anveil last year, and brought him home."

Lennie shifted in his seat.

"He claims to be retired military and stalks around like he owns the place. They gave him my room since he has gout, arthritis, and other issues."

Iona took a deep breath. "Where do you keep your clothes now? Where do you sleep?"

"I sleep on the couch. I have to go past him for my clothes, and everything." Lacy hid her eyes. "Within a week of his taking over my room, he'd grab my bottom when I'd go in for my clothes in the mornings. He was supposed to leave the room so I could change clothes. He never did. I changed in the bathroom for months."

Iona reached out her hand.

Lacey grabbed it and squeezed it. "A couple of months later, he wouldn't let me leave the room to change clothes. I had to change in front of him. Then." She sobbed.

Lennie wanted to not be there. Her story would be painful. Maybe worse than anything he had ever heard before.

"One night, dad was gone, mom was at a school parent teacher meeting. I wanted to go to bed. Berteeno said he'd go in there with me to protect me. It didn't turn out that way." She wailed. Her hands clenched and she hit the table multiple times. "I hate them both."

Lennie pulled back. He shouldn't be here. Tracie should be here. Jo. Janella. Even Melissa. Anyone except him.

The tears subsided. "Please. Take me somewhere safe."

Iona glanced at him.

He nodded. "Lacey. I will take you somewhere safe, if you are willing to go with me. I promise I won't hurt you."

Lacey glanced at Iona.

Iona nodded. "He will protect you. You must go to the hospital in Albuquerque, then to a safe place."

"What about my parents?"

"They'll find out. After you are safe."

Lacey nodded. "I'll go. May I take someone with me?"

"Call Zadema." Chris would know what was going on and could let her mother know. It wouldn't be the first time the young woman had helped them. And not the last.

"I've met her." Lacey wiped her eyes. "When do we go?"

"In ten minutes. I'll need to speak to Zadema."

Release

Lennie glanced back at the case files for Lacey Hanley. It had been six months. Difficult to believe. So much had happened. And so little at the same time.

Both parents were convicted of placing Lacey in danger of child molestation.

Berteeno Cannon was given another chance. The sexual assault charge would stay on his record for ten years, and then not be visible to nongovernment sources if he kept his record clear. He had seemed sincere enough at the trial. There was a concern that he too would have a sexually transmitted disease.

Lacey Hanley had been given a life sentence she didn't deserve. She had tested positive for AIDS. No young woman deserved to be raped by a child sex offender and be given such a devastating health sentence. This would affect her for the rest of her life. She finished her high school education online, and was

determined to stay at the Home Track Village to help those who arrived, many with sexually transmitted diseases, for as long as she could physically function.

Chapter 29

Jo - Dreama Tribbon - Year 16

Jo pulled into Carrizozo. The check engine light flickered on for the second time. She sighed. Her best option was to stop at the car lot where she had bought the van.

That would mean talking to Charlie Mold. Kyle's father. He had promised to let her know if he heard anything about Kyle or Anne. No word. He had lived up to the promise of helping those in both Home Track Village and Ghost Valley obtain reliable transportation when they were ready and able to regain new lives.

She pulled into his parking lot. The van coasted to a stop in front of the door. Jo had aimed for the space beyond the door. She turned the key. It made a grinding sound. She pocketed the key and hurried inside.

Charlie Mold had stepped around the counter. "Heard it grind to a halt."

She nodded.

"Help me push it to the space. I will check it in an hour, after an oil change and is finished."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Put the key in, turn it one notch, put it in neutral and steer. I'll do the rest." He opened the door for her.

It was strange to be driving with no control of the vehicle. At least, it was only a few vehicle lengths to the stopping spot. She applied the brakes and turned the key back to off.

Outside she stared at the van. "Don't know what happened. It was fine an hour ago."

Charlie huffed. "Come in and have coffee. Tell me about it." He led the way back into the shop.

She sat at one of the waiting area tables.

He joined her with two cups of coffee.

"It was fine until I turned into town. It lost power. Not sure what happened. It coasted to a stop."

"We'll fix it. You have a friend who will pick you up?"

"Yeah. Lennie is at the office. Cousin Nani is expecting me." She took a sip of the coffee. It had a strange taste. Like pencil shavings.

Charlie took a sip of coffee and sat his cup down. "Let them know you are here. I want to ask you about something."

Jo raised her eyebrow at him. She texted Lennie. "What about?"

Charlie touched the rim of his cup. "How would I know what isn't normal?"

Jo's stomach lurched. "Is this about Anne? Or Kyle?"

"No. A customer came in yesterday, with her daughter. The daughter struggled to walk."

"Go on."

"She must have been late twenties. She kept walking into things. Her mother wouldn't be quiet and fussed at her constantly. When I went out to work on their car, I found something."

"What?" It could be anything.

He looked at her face. "It was a white stick in four pieces held together with an elastic band. What was it? Why couldn't she walk right?"

"Did you ask her?"

"The mother didn't give me a chance to speak to her daughter. After I finished repairing her car, she grabbed her daughter's elbow, forced her out, and shoved her into the car."

"That is odd." Lennie texted that he'd be there in a few minutes.

"She never seemed to settle on anything, listening to her phone talking rather than looking at it. Odd, unexpected behavior from an adult."

"Can you contact them?"

"I have her address and phone number. I thought you might share it with Chris Stoney. I was going to call him today. It's difficult to talk to him."

"I understand. I'll relay it to him."

Charlie Mold hurried back to his counter. He wrote down the name, number, and address and handed it to her. "Be sure to tell Chris I'll talk to him if I need to. I hope she isn't drugged."

"We'll check into it. Thanks for telling me." She drank the rest of the coffee and went outside.

Jo handed the slip to Lennie. "Not sure what it's about. Charlie Mold is concerned about drugs. That's not right. I should know what it means. Wish I could see what he had seen. I might be able to figure it out."

Lennie steered the car to his office. "What did he say it looked like?"

"A white stick in four pieces held together by elastic."

"That's not much to go on. How long? How wide were the sticks? Was it a ladder? I don't think so. I'll find a few pictures and go visit him tomorrow."

Case File

Focus: Dreama Tribbon, female, age 28
Reporter: Charlie Mold, male age 60
Abuser: Mother - Yanell Tribbon, female, age 53
Abuse type: Neglect due to blocking development
Family:
Mother - Yanell Tribbon, female, age 53

Interview

A few days later, Jo met Lennie to drive to Yanell Tribon's home.

"Did you find out anything?"

Lennie laughed. "It's not drugs. The daughter uses a cane for the blind. She left it in the car. We need to know why." He turned left down a residential street.

"I thought it might be something like that. What did Charlie Mold say when you visited him?"

"I took a few pictures of canes, ladders, and other things and he pointed out the closest match. Now, it's up to us to determine the age of the young woman, and if she is safe."

Jo laughed. "That's not so bad. Hope it's a non-case."

"Don't count on it." Lennie pulled into the drive of a nice-looking house on a well-cared for street. "Yanell Tribbon wasn't nice on the phone. She did agree to meet. If I didn't visit alone."

"That's why I am here."

"Need a woman along to filter her emotions."

He must be scared of Yanell Tribbon.

Jo rang the doorbell.

Lennie stood behind her with his laptop in his hand.

The door opened. A tall strong woman opened the door. "Come in. Don't leave a mess on the clean carpet. You. Close the door behind you." The woman stalked through the entry past a table.

Jo glanced back at Lennie before following the woman into her home. She stepped past the glass table. The woman and another woman sat at a table. She walked into the sunlit room.

The brisk woman pointed to a seat. "I am Yanell Tribbon, this is my daughter Dreama."

Jo sat down.

Lennie sat beside her.

Ms. Tribbon sat down across from them.

Dreama hid her face.

"I want to know who reported what."

"I can't answer that," Lennie said. "Law protects those who report any cases of concern for human welfare."

"Yeah right. I'll find out. Probably a seedy teen grocery store clerk. I'll have their job."

"You wouldn't like it." Jo turned to Dreama. "Dreama, tell me about you."

The younger woman turned her ear toward Jo. "Can't."

"I do the talking here." Ms. Tribbon touched her daughter's arm. "My daughter is not allowed to speak to strangers. It is my job to take care of her and make her as presentable and normal as possible."

"A woman who is not allowed to speak for herself is not normal. How old is Dreama?" Jo stared at Ms. Tribbon.

"She is twenty-eight."

"Then she is old enough to speak for herself."

"This is my home. She is not allowed to speak to strangers."

Lennie shifted in his seat. "I have a warrant filed to speak to her alone. Without you in the room. Your choice. You may stay in the house, if you do not interfere with her speaking to us. If you are silent, you may stay in the room. If you cannot be, you will be asked to leave. I have the police at the end of the street ready to serve the warrant and hold you outside if you refuse to comply."

The woman made a rude noise. "How dare you."

Lennie glanced out the back window. "Your porch has a chair right by the window. I guess you allow your daughter to sit in it, and watch her. You may sit there and watch to be sure we do not hurt her. If that is what you are afraid of."

The woman made another rude noise. "I will be watching you. Don't tell them anything." She stalked out of the back door and turned the chair to watch into the window.

"Dreama. How long have you been blind?" Jo leaned closer to her.

"I've been partially blind since early childhood. Lost most of the rest of my vision a year ago." She looked at the window.

"Do you walk with your cane?"

"Mom hates it. Thinks it makes me stick out as someone to pity. She won't let me use it in public."

"That's not safe."

"No. She tries to hold my arm to guide me. She runs me directly into objects. A wall one time. I had a black eye from that."

"I'm sure that hurt."

"It did. I couldn't see it."

"What do you do all day?"

Dreama sighed. "I watch TV. Knit shawls I'll never see or wear. Mom gives them to the less fortunate. I think. She says she does. Mom may unravel them and have me knit them again. The yarn seems to have been used many times."

Rescue

Lennie tapped something onto his laptop. "Are you allowed to do anything you want to?"

"Oh no. Mom thinks a blind person can't do anything. She is ashamed of me, and won't let me do what I can do."

"Do you have any other family?"

"No. I had a cousin. Haven't heard from her in years."

Jo tapped the table in front of the young woman. "Do you want to stay here?"

"I have to, don't I?"

"No. Dreama. You are a middle-aged adult. You need to be taking care of yourself. Living on your own. With people your own age." Jo gulped. What this young woman was suffering was a type

of neglect that wouldn't be quite called neglect, since she was an adult, and not elderly. In order to help her, they had to take her away from her mother. Janella could help her. Either village would be a good place for her.

"Would you like a job? A place to live? People to be around?"

Dreama nodded. "Mom would never let me."

Lennie closed his laptop. "It's not her choice. It is yours. In fact, it is up to you if you even want to allow her to visit you after you move out."

"I can't."

Jo touched her hand. "I'm the same age as you. I've been in my own home for a decade. So can you. You can do it. Now. The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be."

"Your mom won't always be here for you. What will you do then?" Lennie leaned closer.

Ms. Tribbon tapped on the window.

Dreama turned her phone over a few times. "I don't know. My friends keep telling me the same things. I haven't listened. Mom would be alone."

"She is ashamed of you. If she decides she wants to work too, she will. Give her her freedom, by taking yours."

Dreama nodded.

Lennie's phone beeped. "Chris is next door if we need him."

"It's up to you." Jo leaned back.

"Tell mom for me."

"You telling her is the first step. I'll help you pack."

"Find my cane. I lost it."

"We will. Or buy you a new one." Jo touched her hand.

Lennie waved to Ms. Tribbon.

She stepped in. "What did you say to her?"

Dreama looked up. "Mom. It's time I find a job and a place of my own. They are going to help me."

"They'll abandon you. You are blind. No one wants you."

Dreama stood up. "You don't want me. Others do. I am going."

"Don't expect to come back. I'll bring a court order against these people and you will have to come home."

"No you won't. Jo, help me pack." Dreama lurched toward the door.

"Where is her cane?"

"She doesn't need it. I guide her where she needs to go." Ms. Tribbon put her hands on her hips.

"She does need it. What will she do when you aren't here to take care of her?"

Ms. Tribbon gave her a dirty look. "I threw it away. I won't have her damaging my car, cabinets, or doors with it."

"You'd rather she be hurt than damage your precious possessions?"

The woman glared at her.

Jo followed Dreama to her room.

It was pitiful. One dresser piled with clothes. Shoes scattered on the floor. Electronics on a desk. The chair was missing.

"She has to leave the electronics. I paid for those." Ms. Tribbon yelled.

A tear dropped off Dreama's face. "We will buy you better ones. Ones where the cords aren't frayed."

"She took my chair. I kept tripping over it. I have to plug them in and sit on my bed. I trip over the cords." Dreama piled her clothes on the bed. Many looked like little more than rags. Her shoes were tattered and torn from tripping over curbs.

"Let's choose one or two of your favorites. Leave the rest for her. We will buy you new clothes."

Dreama smiled. "Really?"

"You need them if you are going to work. Nice, comfortable, warm clothes."

Dreama picked through the pile. "I think this is my red shirt, and my favorite pants. I'll keep them."

"Ready?"

She nodded.

"How may I help you?"

"Hold out your arm, I'll let you guide me." Dreama reached until she touched Jo's arm.

Jo didn't like that feeling. It was strange to have someone touching her arm. Not good either. It reminded her too much of Kyle Mold. A memory Jo did not want to re-live.

"Is everything okay?" Dreama looked at her.

"Sorry. Not used to being touched. Not a normal feeling to me. We will help you be independent soon."

"Okay."

Jo led Dreama out of the house, past her glaring mother.

Release

Dreama's recovery would be slow. Janella contacted a blind organization to help Dreama regain the skills she had lost, and learn the newest adaptive technology. It would take a few months to learn all she needed to know. After that, the plan was too send her away for a month to train with a guide dog, so she would be able to help even more at either, or both, villages.

Chapter 30

Lennie - Uda Travell - Year 17

Iona waited for Lennie in her office. As usual, the room was sparsely decorated. The difference today was a clear plastic bag with black specks in it.

He glanced at the bag as he sat down. It wiggled and the black specks ran around the air tight clear plastic.

"This is what fell out of Uda's bookbag this morning. If you look closely, you'll see three roach egg sacs in there as well. She was set to re-infest the school with roaches after summer break."

"That makes it sound like she was planning to do it."

Iona laughed. "I know better. Many of our students live in deplorable situations. And they bring bugs from home, share them, and leave many to roam the halls and breed in the night. It's a tough job for the custodians to take care of the bug population safely."

"You can't tell the students they can't come to school if they bring in bugs, can you?"

"It's been considered. Some schools are online now. A few schools in the past have denied students to come to school with head lice. And most contagious diseases."

"Never thought of roaches as contagious. Guess they are."

"That's for sure! We didn't catch all the bugs that spilled out of her backpack. When her teacher asked her about them, she stared at her as if she had no idea what she was talking about."

Iona pushed the bag further away. "After the teacher caught them in the plastic bag that had held aquarium fish an hour before, she spoke to Uda quietly."

"What did she say?"

"Uda looked her in the eye and said, 'I don't understand why they all screamed. They are just bugs. They are everywhere. In your food, drink, on the walls, the ceiling, the bed. Can't get away from them.'"

Case File

Focus: Uda Travell age 12
Reporter: Teacher to Iona Glenn, school counselor, female, age 37
Abuser: Mother - Arina Travell, female, age 38
Abuse type: Neglect - bugs infestation, outgrown clothes
Family:
Mother - Arina Travell, female, age 38

Lennie covered his eyes. He had wanted a different case. One that wasn't sexual abuse. This was different. "That does not sound good."

"Her previous teachers say the same thing. Other students call her names, and won't sit near her. They are afraid of getting bugs from her. And if they need paper, they'll ask anyone except her. In fact, her last teacher was known to put her papers in a plastic bag and grade them with gloves on."

"What an embarrassment."

Iona pulled out the papers and handed them to Lennie. "I am not sure what to think. Her mother doesn't attend parent teacher meetings. When she does, she is dressed in little more than rags herself. No one wants to use the term drugs. She does stumble when walking, and is unnaturally thin, much as her daughter is."

"Why hasn't this been reported before?"

"Teachers hoped the home situation would improve. They sent home notes, emailed, called, and the mother says she is doing the best she can."

"What is the best she can do?"

"It's up to you to find out. Contact any services that will help. Maybe a six-month extermination team. Whatever it takes."

"Do I meet Uda today?"

Iona waited. "Perhaps. Let's walk by her class outside, and I'll point her out. No need to speak to her. She doesn't know anything about sanitation, or health regulations." She stood up and led the way out of the office.

Lennie followed her through the building, and out to the physical education field.

Two classes practiced a relay game. Ten kids ran down a field to tag ten more to hobble to the next ten.

Iona pointed to a girl who looked paper thin, as if a gentle breeze could blow her away. She wore a thin, short dress, that looked as if it had been washed a few dozen times too many. Whatever the pattern on it was, it had long worn off. They were far enough away that any rips and tears were not visible. Although one shoulder strap hung loosely down her arm. She had long stringy hair, with a few locks that covered one eye.

"I've seen enough."

"I thought so." Iona ushered him back to the building so that he could be led out by the security guard.

Lennie worked on research that afternoon. Part of the problem with pest control is that when bugs, particularly roaches, become immune to certain products, then you switch products, and a toxic stew develops in the building, or home. Without proper cleanup between toxins, it could cause permanent brain, and other organ, damage. Many people skipped the cleaning between pesticides, because they saw the bugs, and thought it wasn't worth cleaning until they were gone. He called five different pesticide companies. All of the local companies had been out to the home. One refused to go back, the bug problem was too dangerous they said. They wouldn't advise going in without a respirator.

Lennie gulped. If a pesticide company said it was too dangerous for them, it was too dangerous for a woman and her daughter.

There was one company in Albuquerque Karen recommended. They were the last he would call. After he met Ariana Travell. He had to know how bad the place was before he called them.

Interview

Lennie closed his laptop. He wasn't taking it today. To dangerous too invite roaches into his electronics. He walked outside. Chris waited for him in the parking lot.

"Ready to meet Ariana Travell?"

Chris turned the car on. "I'm concerned. If it's as bad as the Pesty Control said, we cannot let Uda go home. And may have to remove Ariana."

"I hope it's not that bad."

"I've seen bad. And taken people out. Condemned homes, and had them return. Not much we can do."

"We will do something. That number of roaches should not be in a child's backpack."

Chris parked the car in front of a home that hid behind bushes. A trash can sat at the corner of the home. It wasn't overflowing. There were a few stray tall grass or weeds around the edges of the property. Nothing that looked too bad. A shutter hung at an odd angle.

Lennie stepped up and walked to the door. The porch had roaches crawling on it. Not uncommon for roaches to be outdoors. Unusual for them to not run and hide. He rang the doorbell. A roach ran out and across his hand. He jumped back.

A dog barked.

A woman answered the door. She wore an almost see-through dress that ended at her knees. "Yes."

The smell that emanated from the home was one of heat, wet, and a strange stench he couldn't recognize. "Hello Ariana Travell, I am Lennie Darendale. I'm here to speak to you about your daughter Uda."

The woman stepped back. "Come in. What trouble is she in?"

Lennie stepped into the home.

The ceiling, walls, and floors squirmed with roaches. It didn't look like there was even a square inch of space that wasn't covered in bugs. A pile of roaches fell from the ceiling and landed in front of her feet. The dog's food and water bowl nestled against a wall. If there was food available, it wasn't visible under the crawling mass in both bowls.

"Let's go outside. The air is fresher outside."

Rescue

She tilted her head at him. Roaches fell out of the stringy hair that covered her shoulders.

He walked back out the door. He looked down. His skin tingled as if it were covered in crawling bugs. This was no place for a living being. Not even the dog.

Ariana Travell brought the dog out with her. A tiny Yorkie mix who like to bark at everything. Little black specks jumped off it and onto Lennie.

Fleas. Yuck. Another infestation he didn't want in his own home.

Lennie lead her down to Chris's patrol car and leaned against the door. Where to even begin?

Chris rolled the window down enough to listen.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" Ariana hugged her dog. More roaches jumped out of her hair and clothes. A few landed on the car.

Lennie closed his eyes. "We've had reports that your home is buggy."

"It is bad. We've done everything I can afford. Pest control companies haven't had any luck either. It's safe. We have food, clothes, and shelter."

"I'm sorry. Your home isn't safe. In fact, you may not re-enter it. Nor send your dog in."

"It's my home."

"No. It will be condemned. It will take four months to six months without food, water, or anything else, before all of the adult roaches, and unhatched eggs die. Then, the home will have to be gutted. No pesticide company can save it. The walls will be rotted with bug droppings and dead bugs. There isn't a square inch of wall visible."

"It's my home. I can't give up my belongings."

"You can't take them. The bugs are falling out of your hair. Bugs hide during bright sunny days like today. None should be visible at all."

"We've tried. The pest control companies haven't fixed it. They come out and spray, and they increase instead of decrease." A tear dripped off her cheek.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Ten years. We didn't know the home was infested when I bought it. We found out after we moved in. Can't I keep my clothes?"

"No. There is no way to be sure all the bugs are out. We can't risk transporting the population to anyone else.

Ariana cried. "Are you taking my daughter from me?"

"No. You, Uda, and your dog will be sent to the hospital to have your health checked, be cleaned up, and be given fresh clean clothes. Then, I have a place for you to stay for a few months until professionals decide what is to be done with your home."

She cried.

Chris opened the back door. "I know it is a patrol car. You aren't under arrest. I do have to ask, are there any more living people or animals inside the structure?"

"No." She sat down. She wiped her eyes. A roach ran across her forehead.

Lennie shivered. The ride back to the office would be stressful. His skin crawled. A hot bath wouldn't be enough to feel clean tonight.

Release

Lennie read back through his files. The fire department had checked out the home of Ariana and Uda Travell. There were no signs of living creatures other than roaches. And a few spiders. It was determined that saving the home wasn't possible. The only solution to rid it of roaches, and not transport the bug problem, was to burn the structure.

The fire department made a training day of it. It was a sunny day. They watered all the surrounding area to prevent fire from spreading. Then, they designed a fire that would spread from the outside circle into the structure itself so as few bugs as possible would survive.

Ariana and Uda stood across the street and cried as their home burned. On that day, they wore clean, well-fitting clothes. Their skin looked healthy. They had gained weight. Their hair was clean and shiny, no longer lanky and stringy. After the fire, they would return to a home where they were living with an elderly woman and help her continue to live in her own home as long as she could.

Ariana had recovered from pneumonia. She would have respiratory problems, and heart trouble for the rest of her life. Potential other issues could occur.

Uda would have asthma, and that would haunt her for the rest of her life. She could potentially develop other health concerns in later years as a result of living in a bug infested home.

The Yorkie had recovered from a serious flea infestation. He now had fresh clean food and water without having to share with bugs of all sorts. Anemia had taken a toll, and would shorten his life expectancy.

Chapter 31

Jo - Varena Orloft - Year 17

Jo and Daisy sat in the hospital in Albuquerque. Her daughter wasn't doing well. Brother/sister babies don't thrive. Genetic disorders kill many of them. This time, her son had stopped breathing. Previous doctors had said nothing was wrong. The surgeon walked into the waiting room and ushered them into a private office.

"Daisy, I've read your file. Many doctors will refuse to treat you, or your daughter. I have to ask; do you have any contact with the father?"

"No. I won't. I am set to be notified if he attempts to contact me, or is within fifty miles of me."

The doctor nodded. "Good. The bad news is, your daughter has a serious congenital heart defect. Surgery will be required. Her survival chance isn't good."

"Without the surgery?"

"A few months at most. I wouldn't guarantee more."

Daisy wiped a tear off her nose. "I adore my daughter. Sometimes. If she survives, what are her chances?"

The doctor looked away before looking back at her. "The longer she survives, the better her chances."

"I don't know what is best."

"How do you feel when you look at your daughter?" The doctor made a note on the chart.

"She reminds me. I don't want to let it pass on to her. It isn't her fault."

The doctor reached across the desk. "It isn't. Will she be happy with you? I know your organization will find him a good home. You may visit her. Let her grow up until you both are ready. You are a teen yourself. A young woman, who deserves a life. As does she."

"If she survives."

The doctor nodded.

"Jo can you arrange things if she survives?"

Jo nodded. "Yes. I will. Janella will take the child to her village. At Ghost Valley, she'll be surrounded by men of all ages. A few have daughters with them."

Daisy smiled. "That would be good."

The doctor went deeper into detail about the complexities of the heart defect, and what he and his team would have to do to save the young girl.

Jo's phone beeped. Chris's beep. "Sorry, have to take this." She stepped out the door. The doctor and Daisy remained in her sight.

The message was a simple text. "A father on daughter abuse case moves to grandfather on infant granddaughter. Need you now."

Jo texted back. "At hospital with Daisy. Call in ten minutes." She stepped back into the office.

"I'm sorry Daisy. I have to go. Are you going to stay with the baby, or do you want to go with me?"

"I'll stay. There are young women my age in the hospice wing who need company."

"Text me if you need me."

"I will."

"We are almost done. I'll let you know when the surgery is." The doctor stood up. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Be ready. May have another case for you." She hurried down the hallway to the elevator.

Chris's call was urgent. Varena Orloft, and her baby daughter, Willow. Their lives were in danger. Serious danger.

Case File

Focus: Varena Orloft, female, age 23

Reporter: Chris Stoney, male, age 35

Abuser: Father/Grandfather - Oarcad Orloft, male, age 45

Abuse type: Sexual, Emotional, Male Suppression of Women, Verbal

Family:

Father/Grandfather - Oarcad Orloft, male, age 45

Daughter - Willow Orloft, female, age 6 months

Interview

Jo joined Chris at a coffee shop near the home where Varena Orloft lived. They stepped into the party room they could close off, and the waitresses would see through the window if they needed anything.

"What happened?"

Chris pushed the hot coffee to the middle of the table. "I took the call. She will be here shortly to tell her story. We can't let her go back to the only home she knows. Not with the baby."

A knock sounded at the door. A waitress opened it and ushered in a young woman with an infant.

The woman's face was pale. Too pale. The infant's face wasn't much better. She sat down across from them.

"Varena Orloft?"

She nodded. "My baby's not well."

"What do you mean?" Jo pushed her steaming coffee to the side.

"She's still bleeding."

Jo glanced at Chris. "Let me see."

Varena handed her the infant.

Jo checked where Varena showed her. There was a trickle of blood between her legs. Not much. How much had the infant lost?

Baby Willow giggled.

"Keep her calm. Tell us what happened." Jo handed the baby back. She'd watch her for a few moments. Enough to gain the woman's trust.

The waitress brought in coffee for Varena. "Would you like anything else?"

"No thanks." Jo checked her phone to see if Daisy had texted.

The waitress left and closed the door.

"You called me." Chris opened his laptop.

"Yes." Varena gripped her baby tight against her chest until she squeaked.

Jo touched the woman's hands.

She loosened her grip and sat the baby in her lap. "My father. He is a bad man. I didn't know how bad. Now. He is hurting my

daughter like he hurt me." Varena gulped for air. She clawed at the table.

"How can I talk about it? He will hardly let me leave the house. I begged to interview for a job. He agreed, if I let him watch my daughter." Varena cried.

"When I returned from the interview, Willow was asleep. She was covered in blood. My father had to leave for his job. He locked me in the house with my baby."

"What?"

"He locks me in, since I ran away a few times a few years ago."

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-three."

Jo closed her eyes. "What about Willow?"

"I cleaned her up. It wasn't only blood between her legs. I cried. I took her and snuck out a window I had loosened the bars on a few years ago. I called."

Rescue

"Chris." Jo reached for the baby's blanket to cover her up.

"I'm taking notes. I think we need to take both young women to the hospital. Take them to Daisy."

"We don't have much time. When my father finds out I am gone."

"You'll be safe." Jo gulped her coffee. She pulled a cloth and a mask out of her bag. "Here put this on. Give Willow to me. You are coming with me. Chris."

"Right behind you. Go now."

Jo tied the scarf around Varena's mask. She took Willow in her own arms. "Don't speak until we are in the van. Then sit in the in-floor seat in back. Not up front. I'll hand Willow to you. Strap her into the seat beside you."

Varena nodded.

They walked through the coffee shop.

The waitress smiled in their direction. Safe so far.

In the van, Varena did what she had been told.

Jo started the van and turned back toward the hospital.

"May I take the mask off? It itches."

"Keep it on until we are in into the emergency room. For your safety. As well as Willow's."

"I would never hurt her." Varena rocked back and forth in the seat.

Jo turned on the radio to listen as Chris followed a few hundred feet behind them watching for trouble.

"I know our father had taken her clothes off a few times and given her baths. I asked him not to."

"Our?"

Varena sighed. "He's the father of Willow as well as me. He didn't like it when I'd run away, and find a safe place to live, and find a job. It simply wasn't allowed. He said a baby would keep me home where I belonged so I could take care of him in his old age."

Jo wanted to scream. Not that it would do any good. In fact, it'd hurt, or kill all of them. She kept her eyes on the road. Before long, she drove into the emergency room line.

A nurse waited with a wheelchair.

Jo knew her. She had seen her many times before. Too many times. "Go ahead Varena, take Willow. Stay with that nurse. I'll be right there."

Jo parked the van and rushed back to the emergency room.

A nurse pointed her to an emergency room bay.

Jo entered to find Varena alone.

"They took Willow. Said she had to have emergency surgery. And a blood transfusion. Will she be okay?"

Jo hugged her. "I don't know."

Chris joined them.

Jo told him the rest of what Varena had said in the van.

He added it to his notes.

Jo texted Daisy to let her know where she was.

They waited an hour before the doctor returned. "We were able to stabilize her. I will speak with Chris Stoney and Jo Forester alone. I am sorry Varena Orloft. I do not know if she will survive the blood loss, or what permanent damage may have been done to your daughter."

Jo texted Daisy to meet her and stay with Varena.

A nurse led Daisy and Varena to the recovery room where Willow was. A guard would be at the door so they couldn't leave, and no one could enter.

Chris and Jo walked to the doctor's office.

"Sit down." The doctor's face was lined and expressionless. "That baby cannot go back to where she was."

"She won't. Nor will the mother."

"It doesn't look good at all for baby Willow. Honestly, I don't expect her to live."

"Sick, like Daisy's daughter?"

"Could be worse. I'm not going to talk about it until the test results come back. The mother, Varena needs to be in a safe place."

"I'll see to that." Jo clenched her hands. As much work as they had done, and more abused people fell out of the woodwork, much as those roaches and fleas had jumped at Lennie a few weeks before.

"I know you will. I don't want to tell the mother what I suspect until I know more either. She will need someone strong here for her. Daisy will be a good choice. Don't let Daisy stay with her every minute. It'll wear her down."

"I know. Thank you doctor."

The doctor nodded at them both as they left the room. In some ways, it was good to be the ones these cases were reported to. They already knew something the patients themselves did not. This sharing of information was a violation of patient rights. Except in abuse cases. It was a fine line.

Release

Willow Orloft lingered in the hospital for weeks. She never recovered from the sexual abuse. The doctor's test results arrived. She also suffered from several serious birth defects.

The day Willow died, Daisy held Varena's hand and hugged her close. The following day, Daisy and Varena would take Daisy's daughter home with them to the Home Track Village.

Together, the two young women forged a friendship through the mutual bounds of child sexual abuse.

As for Varena's father, Oarcad, fought in the courts for the return of Varena and Willow. Due to testimony, and the paternity test, he went to prison instead.

As Chris loaded him into the patrol car outside of the courthouse, Oarcad Orloft screamed for the return of his daughter and daughter/granddaughter.

The community turned away from him.

Chapter 32

Lennie - Agnes Whitter - Year 17

Lennie dusted Anne's photo. The frame was beginning to show its age. The picture never would. He had scanned it in to his computer to keep it forever.

A knock at the door brought him out of his reverie.

"Come in."

Chris opened the door and walked in. "Complicated case coming up. Need your help finding resources."

"What is this case?" Lennie turned to his laptop.

"Agnes Whitter. A ninety-year-old woman living in her own home, with her granddaughter, Ellie Wilson, aged fifty, great-granddaughter, Bri Wilson, age thirty, and great-great-granddaughter, Jessa Wilson, age 12."

"All women."

"The worst part is, Ellie works sixty hours a week, and Bria works eighty hours a week to support the four of them in that home. I don't know how they do it. At fifty, Ellie is working far too many hours. Jessa is basically being raised by Agnes. They aren't at home enough to take care of anything. They have to hire out more people to keep the home in good shape, which means working more hours."

"An endless cycle." Lennie poured a cup of coffee. "Why did they call you?"

Chris sat down. "Jessa was doing the family finances and noticed something wrong. She notified her school counselor, Iona, who called me."

Lennie rubbed his forehead. "At twelve she's doing the family finances?"

"She's pretty good. It seems, besides lacking health care, and money for home health care, Agnes has been making expensive mistakes over the last few years. Tools are missing from the garden shed. And now. She is sending money orders in the thousands. She doesn't have that kind of money."

"Oh my. Any idea who is scamming her?"

"No. Need you to talk to the family. I've contacted them all. Insisted they meet with you. Bria can't figure out when. She makes it home long enough to change clothes and go to her other job."

"That's no life. She'll be dead by fifty if she keeps overworking."

"I know. College degrees, and she's stuck working retail. It seems her husband, and her mother's husband, ran up big bills before they died. Their business flatlined. IRS wants more money than the house they live in is worth for the sale of two homes, and a business the women had no interest in running."

"That's not right."

"The husbands thought they left their wives and daughters well off. Perhaps they shouldn't have sold the business in another state and moved back to take care of Agnes Whitter. Someone needs to be taking care of her."

"Sounds like it."

"Iona and Jessa will meet with you in the morning. Teleconference with Ellie and Bria afterwards. I'll text you the information. They'll both be working in Albuquerque. I think they stay there most of the week, so they don't know what goes on at the Whitter home."

"I'll let you know."

Chris drank his coffee before he left.

Case File

Focus: Agnes Whitter, female, age 90

Reporter: Chris Stoney, male, age 35

Abuser: Gardener - Theo Alten, male, age 28

Abuse type: Fraud, Scam. Steals tools from the shed. Also makes a money order scam.

Family:

Granddaughter - Ellie Wilson, female, age 50 (works 60 hours a week)

Great-Granddaughter - Bria Wilson, female, age 30 (works 80 hours a week to provide money for medical care and home health care)

Great-Great-Granddaughter - Jessa Wilson, female, age 12

Interview

Lennie was escorted into Iona's office. He sat down.

She entered the room and sat down. "Jessa Wilson knows what she is doing with the finances. She says her mom and grandmother say she is like her dad and grandfather. I think they would have let her run the family business, if she had been a few years older, and it was more appropriate."

"What was inappropriate about it?"

Iona laughed. "They ran a freight company that transported alcohol from manufacturers to stores local to where they lived. It was well run. Turned a good profit. Both owners were killed in an explosion at the warehouse a few years ago, and medical wasn't covered. Jessa's dad, and another employee were in intensive care for weeks before they died from their wounds. All the investigations took their toll. And lost money from the destroyed merchandise. It was a mess."

"I imagine. Poor young woman. Must have been difficult."

"She thinks there is hidden money. Somewhere. Her dad wouldn't have left her penniless. The stock market had tanked a few weeks before the explosion. If it hadn't been for the medical expenses, they might have been able to survive by only working forty hour weeks."

"Crazy."

"Difficult for women who haven't worked much of their adulthood. They did volunteer work, and helped others. No one was able to help them with the mounting medical bills, and the IRS knocking on their door."

There was a knock at the door. A young woman peeked in. "Is it time for me?"

"Come in Jessa." Iona pointed at the seat on the corner.

Jessa sat down. She glanced at Iona and then at Lennie. "Guess you are here to help us." She pulled out three three-ring binders and opened each one.

"I have half an hour to cover all these folders." Jessa pulled out spreadsheets and more from the red folder.

Lennie's eyes glazed over long before Jessa was done with her presentation. There was one more binder of pages for her to share.

He put his hand on the papers she was discussing. "That's enough. I understand. You are an accountant who hasn't reached high school. Tell me, without looking, in three sentences or less, who did it, when, and why."

Jessa looked up at him. "This isn't a board game. However. I suspect the gardener."

"What has he done?"

"Gramma Whitter hired Theo Alten a few months before I moved in with her. Before I arrived, he was handling her finances and her yard work. He didn't like that I took over her finances."

"That's happened before."

"Gramma had said she didn't have two pennies to rub together. Her bank account was empty."

Lennie leaned forward. This could be part of the problem.

"When I took over, she had over $700 a month left over. After a year, it reached a reasonable amount in her account. I overheard her telling Theo Alten that she had over $8,000 in the bank."

Lennie covered his face.

"Next day, she received a letter while I was in school that my mother was in an accident at work, and needed $8,000 for medical care. It had to be in a money order, and delivered to her gardener within an hour for mom to receive care."

Lennie groaned.

"When I found out, he already had the money order. I demanded to see the envelope the letter had arrived in. It had her address. No return address. And no postmark. I called Ms. Glenn immediately."

"That's good." Lennie's hands shook.

"I know I am as much at fault as anyone, I let her know how much money she had in the bank as we balanced her checkbook every week. Mom and Grandma said I should. I thought so to. I'd want to know, if it was me."

"I keep telling her it isn't her fault. She was doing her job." Iona patted Jessa's hand.

Lennie nodded. "I have to agree with Iona."

"I wasn't. I should have known she couldn't mentally handle it. Her memory is lost. She doesn't know what she doesn't know. I should have kept the books straight, and told her only that her bills

were paid. As he had done before. It's my fault, and now her finances are gone. It has happened before."

"No. I'll contact a lawyer I trust and have her talk to you. Will that help?" Karen could fix this. At least Jessa's self-imposed guilt.

"You may contact her. She'll agree with me."

Iona shook her head.

Lennie texted Karen that he'd send her an email later. She didn't reply instantly. She was probably in court.

A bell rang.

"I have to go. Let me know what you find out." Jessa jumped up, grabbed her binders, and ran out of the room. Not before a tear splashed the table.

"Something deeper is going on here. Too much guilt." Lennie wrote more notes on his laptop.

"I think part of it is missing her father and grandfather. And now her mom and grandmother work more than is healthy. It's a normal overreaction under the circumstances."

Lennie looked up. Pieces of this reminded him of Anne. Overcompensation. That is what Anne had done. "We have to save her from herself. I can't let it happen to her."

Iona touched his hand.

He looked up.

"Jessa is not Anne. She's not Anne's age. We have a little time. Not much maybe. A little. She's twelve, not seventeen."

Lennie nodded. "I better go meet Ms. Whitter."

"Want me to go with you?"

Normally, he would say no. "Sure. Why don't you."

"I'll grab my jacket."

He closed his laptop. What a day. Karen would definitely need to be involved in this case. The young woman, Jessa, would need help to overcome all she had suffered, and learn to not blame herself for the mistakes of others. She had a good head on her shoulders, and he'd see to it that she stayed that way. It was the least he could do.

Rescue

An hour later they drove into Agnes Whitter's driveway. The home was a large rambling, multi-story farm house. Weather beaten, and in need of something.

He walked up to the door and knocked.

Iona stood behind him.

A man answered the door. "May I help you?"

Lennie did his best not to look surprised. The only person it could be was Theo Alten. "We are here to see Agnes Whitter. Is she available?"

"No one here by that name." The man slammed the door in his face.

Lennie's heart sank. Cold seeped in, even though it wasn't cold outside.

Iona shivered. "Call Chris."

"In the car. He may have a gun." They hurried back to the car. "Watch the doors."

Chris didn't answer his phone. Nor the text.

"Call someone to bring Jessa home now. We can't go in without at least her permission."

"Only if we go pick her up."

"Call to have her waiting." Lennie turned the car on and drove as fast as he dared.

Back at the school, Jessa waited. Her face pale. "What's wrong?"

"You have to let us into the house." Lennie did the best he could to keep his voice calm. He was not going to let her worry any more than he had to. He drove back to the house. The long driveway stretched out as if it were miles long.

As he parked he spoke. "Jessa I need you to unlock the door. Stay with Iona. I need to walk in front."

"What's wrong?"

"We don't know." Lennie opened his car door. "Whatever you do, stay behind me, and be aware."

Jessa gulped. She walked up and unlocked the door. And then stepped back behind him.

Release

He walked into the home. A typical two-story farm house. "Direct me please."

"She would be in the kitchen. Past the stairs to the right."

Lennie followed Jessa instructions. Her footsteps padded behind his, and beside the clacking of Iona's heels.

They reached the kitchen. The table was there. Surrounded by chairs. Papers heaped on it. No sign of Agnes. He glanced back at Jessa.

Her finger lifted and pointed. "Those are her bookkeeping books. I locked them in my trunk last night."

Her hand wavered. "The only key is in my pocket."

Lennie nodded. He walked to the table. Brownish smudges had damaged the pages. The one on top was a copy of one he had seen in Jessa's notebooks. He gulped.

He texted Chris. "Backup Now!"

Lennie held his hand out to keep Iona and Jessa where they were. He walked over and looked out the window.

Outside a trail had been created by dragging something heavy toward a tumble down shed in a patch of tall weeds.

"We have to wait on Chris. Don't move." Maybe she wouldn't see the stains from the doorway.

Jessa cried. "Where is Gramma?"

Lennie closed his eyes. If his fears were founded, she wasn't alive.

Within ten minutes, Chris arrived with three police cars. "Where are you?" The text startled him.

"Kitchen. Surround home."

Officers approached.

Chris knocked on the back door.

Lennie opened it. He pointed to the table and then out to the trail.

Chris led the way with two officers beside him.

At the shed, Chris opened the door. The body of an elderly woman sat in a chair, covered in blood.

Lennie turned away. He was too late.

In the days that followed, they learned more.

Theo Alten had attempted to cash the $8,000 money order. It was denied. He had killed Agnes Whitter early the morning that Lennie and Iona arrived. He ranted and raved that he had stayed in the house to kill Jessa Wilson. He had called her a meddlesome teen that kept him from his just payment.

Agnes Whitter's will had been visibly altered to give everything to Theo Alten. It wouldn't stand up in a court of law. The family agreed, it all went to Jessa in a trust fund that she would manage with the assistance of her mother, Bria Wilson.

Chapter 33

Jo - Sherry Jasper - Year 17

Children ran up the steps to the restored church building. Janella had tried multiple times to convince the builders to fix the ramp so it would allow her to enter the building. For some reason, they couldn't, or wouldn't, make it accessible. They'd pretend to listen, and then measure, cut, and rebuild it in the same inaccessible way.

"Jo, new case." Ashley Chardell ran down the stairs through all the gathered children.

"Do we have room for any more people?"

Ashley's long hair swept across a girl that Mable Viola was talking to. "I don't think this case will be like the rest. She might want to come help us. She isn't that kind of rescue."

Jo took the rescue card. It had changed from the day that Ashely had been interviewed. Easy to remember now, and fewer acronyms. Too many people answered phones to have them mix up the meanings.

Case File

Focus: Sherry Jasper, female, age 30
Reporter: Ashley Chardell, female, age 26
Abuser: Toby Jasper, male, age 32
Abuse type: Loss of companionship due to PTSD
Family:
Husband - Toby Jasper, male, age 32

"Loss of companionship?"

"Only term we could come up with. It seems that her husband is not happy with the fact that she has no interest in a romantic relationship due to the sexual abuse she suffered as a child and teen."

"Do you want to go with me to meet her?"

"I need to buy things for the younger girls, so thought I'd go along. If you want me to." Ashley glanced back at the children playing on the steps. "They need new socks, art supplies, and perhaps child-sized building tools. I know Janella wants them to learn as much as possible to fix what the construction crews can't."

Jo laughed. "Or won't. Where are we meeting them?"

Ashley handed her the directions. "I said we'd be there in a few hours."

"That doesn't leave us long."

"I know. I will be ready in ten minutes."

Interview

Two hours later, Jo pulled into a driveway. The home looked nice and quaint. Clean, well-kept yard. Nothing grew more than a foot tall near the house. No bushes near the home for vandals to hide behind.

Jo and Ashley walked up to the home. Jo rang the doorbell.

Short high pitched barks joined the bird song doorbell.

A man opened the door. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm Jo and this is Ashley. We are here to meet Sherry and Toby Jasper."

"Come in." The man opened the door.

A fully fluffed Pomeranian struggled to escape a thin woman's arms and greet them.

Jo held out her hand for the dog to sniff.

The man closed the door and locked it. He led them to the kitchen. "I'm Toby. It's kind of a long story. We don't fit the profile of your clients."

Jo and Ashely sat down.

"Sometimes it is good to meet people who are a different profile. Keeps the hope alive for the future. Maybe we won't have a job someday."

Toby looked at his wife and back to Jo.

Sherry sat the dog on the floor.

The dog trotted over and sniffed of her and Ashley.

"Tell us your story."

"It's Sherry's story."

Sherry hid her face.

"I'll make coffee." Toby stood up and walked to the coffee pot on a nearby counter.

"Sherry. Tell me your story. Your facial scars tell a painful story. What scars does your heart hide?"

Sherry glanced up. "It was an ugly time. They sliced me for not wanting to do what they told me. I didn't want to. Once, I was bleeding, they forced me down on the ground and did what they wanted to me." Her fists covered her eyes.

"When was this?" Jo accepted the coffee cup from Toby.

"I was ten. I'm thirty now. I remember it as if it was moments ago. Colors, fabrics, smells, voices, even lighting takes me back to that moment. To the moment when I dripped blood and crawled away to hide in a corner."

Jo looked at the woman's face. She had many scars. "Did it happen more than once?"

Sherry nodded. "They cut me up three or four times. After that, I'd pass out when I saw them, and wake up hot and sticky. Miserable. I eventually escaped."

"Were they family?"

Sherry nodded.

Typical. Happened. Far too often. Few were reported, because those who should have called the police had been conditioned to believe it was normal. "Did you ever receive medical care?"

"No. My mother said I deserved it if I didn't do what they told me. She said it was normal."

Ashley leaned toward Sherry. "You do know it had probably happened to her too?"

"She said as much before she died. I don't know what they did to her. I heard them one night. She died soon after. They left me alone after that. I was so ugly; they wouldn't even look at me anymore."

"Not entirely true." Toby sat down. "They had messed with so many women, they contracted AIDS. And gave it to her mother. Her mother told them it came from Sherry, to convince them to leave her alone."

"She never told me that."

"I know. She didn't want you to know she died from AIDS."

Sherry turned away. "My scars make people keep their distance, I'm glad of that."

"I know. Your scars have kept you in a protective bubble. I won't always be here. You need to be able to go out and have friends."

Sherry's hands shook. "I don't have friends. Never did. They might find out about me. The specters of my past must stay in the past. I don't like answering questions."

Toby leaned back in his chair. "How long has it been since you have gone somewhere by yourself?"

"I don't know. A year. Maybe two?"

"That's too long." Jo closed her eyes. Sherry would spiral deeper and deeper into, and away from, any future if she kept herself locked in her home.

Toby reached for her cup. "More coffee?"

Jo pushed the cup toward him.

He stood up and walked to the coffee pot. "I called you to help her. It's difficult. I understood Sherry couldn't have children. Now, she shies even from hugs by me. It isn't the life either of us deserve."

Jo accepted the cup he handed her. "It isn't. Sherry, what do you think?"

Sherry's stared at the table. "I don't know. I want to be alone."

"Alone with your thoughts?"

She nodded.

"Are your thoughts re-living those bad days?"

"Yes."

Jo reached out and touched the tips of her fingers. "You do understand, you are punishing yourself by re-living it?"

"I can't not re-live it."

"Sherry. Look up at me. Your mother punished herself like this. And ended up dead."

"I didn't have children. It can't go on."

"It's hurting you and your husband. If you can't stop hurting for you, will you do it for him?"

"No."

"How about someone you don't know?"

"How? It's always there. On the tip of my memory."

Toby glanced away. "It wasn't this bad when we met. I can't remember the last time Sherry smiled. The puppy seems to help. A little. I've talked to her about counseling. She refuses."

"Has she talked to you about it?"

"Yes. After ten years, I don't want to hear about it anymore."

Jo sipped her coffee. "Counseling is something that only exists in our culture. We pay people to be a friend, and listen to us talk about our problems. Being on the outside looking in, a paid friend may recognize a solution, if they aren't too wrapped up in their own problems. We shouldn't be paying people to do what our friends are for. I wish I had pushed one of my friends to talk more, many years ago." Memories of Anne flooded her thoughts. She had said everything was fine. Her religion had only allowed her to talk to a preacher, and not a friend, or cousin. Until her late teens, she had had no problem confiding every secret in Jo. Had the preacher at that church been like Pastor Stork?

Toby stared at her. "What happens in other cultures?"

"People communicate with family and friends. They aren't at work every waking hour. Sherry, do you have any online friends?"

"No. I won't use the internet. People aren't who they say they are on there."

"Do you talk on the phone?"

"Who would I talk to?"

"I have to schedule all appointments, and be here for all repair work." Toby leaned back. "It's as if she has given up. Her hope died, her body exists. She is a ghost in our home. Eating, drinking, and not participating in life. Please help. Help her. Help me."

"May Ashley and I have a moment to talk alone please?"

Toby pushed his cup back. "Sure. We'll go to the back room. Come on Sherry."

Sherry pulled back away from him and walked out of the room. The Yorkie followed, not so quietly.

Rescue

"What do you think?" Ashley leaned toward her.

"She's hurting. She needs to be somewhere she will feel safe to help others. Re-living it isn't helping her, or her husband."

"I don't think there's room at Home Track. Ghost Valley would be worse."

"Definitely. Karen is wanting to start a new village. In Alabama. A majorly needed village for the east coast."

"Are we ready to start a new village?"

"I think so. Going to send Janella and her children there. I think Sherry and Toby would be a great addition. They can stay in Home Track Village. It would be a life change for them. I think Sherry would be better able to recognize abuse signs, and do something about them in such a village. Helping others."

"Sounds good in theory. How much work will it be?"

"A great deal of work. No point in having a federal law, if we don't implement across the country."

"Alabama needs it, as do the states north of it. Are you sure it's a safe place to put a village?"

"Yes. We need to send people from the west to the east, and those from the east to the west. The further from their abusers, the safer they will be."

"Okay."

"You'll train Sherry to replace you, and Toby will replace me. After we find the place to build in Alabama."

"Sounds good. When do we have a group meeting?"

"Next week. Glad for this call. We needed to find a few replacements." Jo stood up and walked to the hall. "Toby, Sherry, we have ideas."

Sherry and Toby returned and sat down.

Jo explained their plan going into more detail.

Sherry's face turned pink. She hid her eyes.

"You can do it. Sherry, it'll be good for you. Your knowledge will help others."

"I'll end up normalizing it. And leading them to harm like my mom did to me."

"No. They'll be in a safe place. One where abusers cannot be."

"How may I help?"

"Find that tiny spark of hope buried under the pain. Toby, you want to help?"

He nodded. "Sure. Sounds better than this."

Release

It was six months before Toby and Sherry had been able to sell their home. Which was okay, because it was six months before the new additional location was found and almost prepared. The west team would move east, and leave a new team, including Sherry and Toby, in Arizona to protect the easterners they sent to them.

Jo knew there was more than one reason to go. It was quite possible that Anne had been taken east. Or north. Alabama was a good place to search. Karen contacted a few of her law school friends who practiced in Alabama, it wouldn't be long before they would be rescuing people there, and shipping them to the Home Track Village in the west.

Chapter 34

Lennie - Pansey Durbin - Year 18

Lennie turned the coffee pot on. There'd be time for one cup before he left to check the potential location in Alabama. He checked the location stats page on his computer. Twenty acres with an eight-foot high fence. It had been a Wildlife park. Now, it would protect women and children as they learned to trust and respect themselves.

He sighed. Jo and Janella would soon be going there to live. If this was the right place. Both would be missed. He'd stay behind and continue the search for Anne here.

The coffee pot gurgled. He poured a cup. Before he went there, he'd go to Florida. Not for a vacation. He'd never taken one. And wouldn't until he found Anne. This was a trip to a maximum-security nursing home prison. Women on one side, men on the other. Some of the abusers who had been convicted with his help had ended up there.

He'd meet Pansey Durbin. She had requested someone from the Underground Railroad Project to visit her before she died. A seventy-eight-year-old woman. Accused, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison for heinous crimes against children, including her own daughter and granddaughter.

A few of the abusers he had known had given confessions before. Many recanted them on the witness stand. This woman wanted to share something so she could die in peace. The question was whether or not he could give her the peace she desired.

Case File

Focus: Pansey Durbin, female, age 78

Reporter: Karen Cole, female, age 36

Abuser: Husband - Chadel Durbin, male, age 75 at death

Abuse type: Stockholm syndrome Sexual, Emotional, Verbal, Physical

Family:
Husband - Chadel Durbin, male, died age 75
Daughter - Dora Durbin, female, age 58
Granddaughter - Edie Durbin, female, age 41

Interview

A few hours later, Lennie rented a car in sunny Florida. He drove to the location of the ferry to the senior citizen maximum-security prison. The ferry was the only legal entrance and exit. A guardhouse stood at the entrance to the dock. A lonely reminder of why he was here.

Pansey had been arrested and convicted of handing small babies to her husband to abuse. She would also take older children and drug them, then video tape her husband with them.

Lennie sighed as he read the notes Karen had sent him. This elderly woman, with brittle bones, and a serious heart condition, would spend her remaining days remembering what she had done. Prisoners lived close enough to the beach they could smell the salt on the breezes that blew through the old stone masonry.

"Stop! Please exit the ferry, and stand calmly on the red line," shouted the security guard.

Lennie glanced at the ground. There were three lines. One looked white, and the other yellow. The green looking line must be the red one. He stepped over to it, along with the other people.

The security guard checked his paperwork. "All good. Is Ms. Durbin someone you know?"

"No. She requested to speak to someone in my organization."

The man nodded. "Sometimes they do. Most request priests. Or wronged family members." The guard moved on to the person behind him.

A second guard followed behind him. "I'll have to wand you to check for any weapons, or explosives. Did you bring desserts?"

"Desserts?"

He moved the wand up and down. "Most of the people here are senior citizens, and are on special diets for health reasons. We have to keep them healthy, even if they will die here. You have all the correct papers, so you may go in. When do you plan to come back out?"

"I only plan to interview Pansey Durbin."

The guard pointed to the entrance. "Go ahead. The ferry leaves in one hour."

Lennie walked up the stone walkway. A few weeds grew near the entrance to the prison walls. The walls were two foot thick. Doors stood open, with cameras pointed down at him as he walked under them.

Inside, he followed a paved walkway to the building. Flowers and grass had been planted near the visitor's door. A few feet away, a door labeled ambulance/hearse stood closed and forbidding.

The sun shone down on him, and the flowers. A darkness covered the beauty of the day. He walked up to the visitor's door. There wouldn't be much time for him to enjoy Florida on his trip to Alabama.

The young receptionist in the darkened waiting area asked to see his visitation papers. After she thumbed through them, she paged for the nurse to bring Pansey to the visitation area.

"We will have your client right down. She isn't doing too well right now. I don't think the sunshine on the upper floor agrees with her."

"They do have sunshine here?"

"Sure, and outside time. It helps keep them calm. Everyone else gets at least 30 minutes a day. They are not allowed out in the yard while the ferry is here. Go through the door on your right, and you will be able to visit with her in a sunny/shady room."

In that room, a barred bay window, three feet off the ground reached to the top of a seven-foot ceiling. There were already a couple of people in the room. One couple, obviously with their lawyer. A man appeared to be being visited by his daughter, or granddaughter. There were tables around, three in the sun, two in the shade, and four in part of both. Lennie chose a table away from the other people where the sunshine would cover him. Pansey could sit in the shade if she desired.

Pansey was gently ushered through the door by her nurse. The older woman was totally supported by the nurse, as she pushed a walker.

"Pansey will be there in a moment. Ring the bell cord by the door and wait when you need me to come back for her."

The woman struggled to sit in a shady spot. "Hello. How are you today?"

"I am fine. I hope you are comfortable telling me your story today." Lennie pulled out a paper to make notes. He also set his phone to record the conversation.

"Never comfortable. I want it told. I do not want other women or children to be in the same place. I am not sure where to begin. Sometimes it is hard to find the beginning. I guess I will start with when I was a little girl."

Shallow breathing made her voice low. "I was raised to be a good little girl, that I must do what an adult told me. I was also raised to believe that once a woman married, she could never leave her husband no matter what the circumstances. At that time, legally, it was almost impossible. Now, I know it would be better to be dead than to believe that. How many lives have I destroyed because I followed the teachings of my childhood? I will never know." Pansey choked back a tear. She grasped the table.

"I grew up, married, and was happy for a while. Then my husband returned from the war. I was not able to keep up with his intimacy drive. I wrongly allowed him to look for others to satisfy it. I felt there was nothing I could do. I could not make him happy. I agreed to share."

She closed her eyes. "One day I had a baby. Then I found him touching her. Chadel threatened to kill me if I did anything. His words stung. ‘You don’t want me anyway. Dora won’t remember it. What’s the harm?'"

Pansey’s voice deepened. "I was shamed and scared. I did not know what to do. At that time, women could not hold legal jobs, own things, or support themselves. I was stuck. Later, I found out he was attacking my sibling's children when they were babies too, but I didn't know this at the time. As my daughter grew up, I worried for her sake and safety. What could I do? Dora, my darling daughter, wasn't mentally healthy. I had no idea how to fix the problem."

Lennie struggled to keep up with her stream of words.

"When Dora was eighteen, she ran away pregnant, and scared. I found out my husband, her father had been abusing her all that time, and his grandchild would be his child. We forced Dora to

marry someone, anyone. It would look legit, and her new husband never knew the truth about the child's true parentage."

Pansey's cheeks blushed as she related an even deepen shame. "When a baby girl was born, my husband wanted me to bring Edie to him. I never thought he would do to her what he had done to his first daughter. He had not learned his lesson. Nothing I could do would stop him. Then, he had me take pictures of what he was doing to Edie, and with her. Chadel had found a way to make money using babies and cameras. When I said, 'No, I don't want to.' He replied, 'You will be out on the streets with no income, no place to live, and if you are arrested you will rot in jail.' I went along with his plans. I didn't know what to do."

Lennie paused to glance at the woman.

"When my granddaughter was ten, we found out she was pregnant. Her mother wasn't mentally competent herself. We had Edie medically declared retarded. This allowed a doctor to perform the necessary surgery, making sure she could never again be pregnant, without any questions as to why we wanted her to have the surgery." Pansey's eyes closed.

A cloud passed over the window and blocked most of the sunshine.

Slowly, deliberately, and even more shamefacedly she related more of her crimes. "My granddaughter fought his attentions to her. Chadel insisted we give her drugs so she would not remember what happened. I gave Edie the drugs. I hoped she did not know, and would never know. I realized the drugs were wearing off faster than he realized. I feared she might remember something someday. She was not retarded as we thought. She was smart. Too smart." Pansey leaned back and breathed for several minutes.

"Chadel wanted to keep Edie almost as a toy in his old age. I hoped it meant he would stop hurting others. He insisted she go to college. He wanted her to be a nurse for him. She left for college, and never returned home. She cut her phone off, and stopped all other contact. My granddaughter was lost."

Pansey broke down in tears. She cried loudly, and heartbreakingly, for a good ten minutes.

Lennie stared. Afraid to reach out to comfort her. How do you say, maybe it's best she disappeared? Maybe she built herself a good life?

Pansey finished crying. She blew her nose before she returned to her story. "There were other children, hundreds, maybe thousands, I don’t know. I know he took hundreds of pictures and videos and sold them. The FBI did not find all the pictures. More than enough to convict us both. I have no idea where the rest are. I doubt he kept copies of the first few thousand pictures, or the early videos either, most of the publishers wanted the originals of them. It doesn't matter anymore. I am glad it's over."

A bell chimed. Their time was halfway gone.

Rescue

"I know I am safest in here. Out there, people would kill me if they knew what I had done. Or, I fear I might fall prey to another scheme. I would rather be dead than to do such a thing again. I hope I haven’t scared you with my story."

Pansey's tale touched too close to home. Lennie had heard variations of it so many times in all of his years as a social worker. "No, it didn't scare me. Why did you want me to come interview you?"

"My husband was murdered in prison, a week after his conviction. They never figured out who did it. It was declared an accident during a riot in the prison cafeteria. I know it was a planned murder. I am sad. He no longer suffers. I do. I don't want this to happen to anyone. Ever. I don't want anyone to become like me. I have no idea how many people I hurt. I know that everyone that comes in contact with our victims feels the hurt I caused." Pansey gripped the table and stared at him.

"Please, teach the young women that they do not have to do everything a man says. Men are not right all the time. Teach them to be prepared to support themselves. Fight to keep laws that allow women to own property and make enough to support themselves and their children. Fight to have minimum wage standards set to a living wage in all communities. Keep fighting to protect women and children from abusers. I know you began an organization to protect women in positions like my life was nearly sixty years ago. I wish it

wasn't sixty years too late for me. Thank-you. You will help to undo all the evil I created in the world. All the hurt and pain will not go away, but it will be softened by your deeds. Many will recover thanks to you. My victims may never say it. I say thank-you."

Lennie had never expected to hear such a sincere apology from an abuser. This woman was not only an abuser. Pansey was a victim too, of a system that she was lost in, and could not find a way out. For her, there was no way out. If Pansey had left her husband, Chadel would have legally stolen his daughter, and continued his abuse of his daughter, and other children. He would have had the legal right to his child at the time, because the mother could not legally support them. What a horrible situation to be in. What could any woman have done in that situation?

Release

"I will rest in peace now." Pansey said the last few words slowly, almost too slow.

Pansey's head slipped backwards. Her slight weight pushed the metal folding chair over. She slid to the ground without making a sound.

The room had emptied. Lennie ran and grabbed the bell the nurse had mentioned earlier.

The nurse ran into the room. "Her heart gave out. She has waited for four years to tell her story to someone, now she will rest in peace. You may go wait at the receptionist desk for an escort back to the ferry."

Tears trickled from the receptionist's eyes. A TV screen showed the whole room next door. Two orderlies picked up the frail body of Pansey.

"I see so many die that way. They are waiting for a little forgiveness before they die. They have to reach a victim, whether one they victimized, or another, to come to terms with their crimes before they die. A hearse will pick her up. You are welcome to come back and talk to other prisoners sometime if you wish."

"No thanks. I want to save lives, not watch people die."

"In order to save lives, you have to have a place to put the people who do kill, so more room has to sadly be made. You are a

good person. This is not an easy job for anyone," the receptionist said.

An escort guard approached.

"Are all the employees here this nice?" Lennie followed him down the steps and out through the open gate to the ferry.

"Yes, mostly. This place is little more than a nursing home with bars on the outside. Most of the people here are not going to hurt anyone, and their cells have to have medical equipment, so we keep it as much like a nursing home environment inside as possible. No inmate has escaped from here. Many say they wouldn't want to. They wouldn't have as safe a place to live, or any medical care on the outside."

"I never expected to feel compassion for these inmates. I have a little compassion for those who are in here now. I almost understand why Pansey did what she did. Survival creates strange behaviors. Stockholm syndrome is common among women her age. I hope my project makes the need for committing such extreme crimes to survive unnecessary. I don't plan a return visit. Thank you for your help. Have a nice day."

Lennie soon returned to the rental car. After another short flight, he would drive a different rental car, and check out the former wildlife reserve that would house those who had been placed in the position Pansey had been forced into sixty years ago. The hope was to prevent future victims, as Dora, Edie, and untold numbers of others had been. Lennie sighed. Had Anne become another Pansey? Could he bare to see her in prison for destroying her child if she had been forced to by an abusive Kyle Mold?

Chapter 35

Jo - Heidi Darsh - Year 18

Jo's phone buzzed.

"Case."

Karen's messages were cryptic. Jo checked her secure email. A longer message awaited her.

Case File

Focus: Heidi Darsh, female, age 33
Reporter: Elderly next door neighbor
Abuser: Husband - Gustonian Darsh, male, age 32
Abuse type: Potential sexual
Family:
Husband - Gustonian Darsh, male, age 32
Daughter - Trible Darsh, female, age 7
Daughter - Shalona Darsh, female, age 10

The call originated from the neighbor. Heidi, with two young daughters, had recently discovered her husband had been indiscreet in front of both girls.

This was a classic sign of a potential predator. She had called for help, even calling the police on her husband. They told her not to worry, since Gustonian Darsh had not hit any of them, there was nothing they could, or would do. She wanted to leave him, but could not for fear he would find her. In addition, she was disabled, and could not qualify for assistance on her own. Social Services had threatened to take her children from her if she left her husband since she was unable to work a full-time job.

The event had not been an isolated incident. When Heidi talked with her girls, she found it had occurred before, several times.

The giant red flag spread across Heidi's front yard, invisible to the people whom the government paid to see it. If she left, her children could be taken from her, and put in a worse position. At least before Ruby's law.

Even with the law, social services would blame Heidi, whether she left or stayed. If she stayed and he became a sexual predator, they'd say she didn't do enough. If she left before he did anything worse, they'd say she hadn't given him time to change to be a good father for them.

Jo groaned. Many social workers lived in an idealized world, where if you tell someone to stop something, they do stop, and never do it again. They had never been poor, nor had they survived abuse. Heidi did not live in that world. Gustonian Darsh would not stop grooming his daughters for abuse. Jo knew what he would do next. If he hadn't already. Shalona might not have told the whole story to her mother.

Which is why Karen transferred the case to her immediately. Lennie couldn't help because he was in Alabama. He hadn't read the case. Social workers in another office dropped the ball.

Interview

Jo texted Chris to meet her in Iona Glenn's office in an hour to interview Shalona and Trible. While waiting for his reply, she reviewed the notes about the girls. Gustonian Darsh was not their biological father. Sadly, this meant that more happened behind the scenes than their mothers knew. Touching and friendly gestures in public that made people think they were a normal healthy family, led to more intensive intimate touching behind closed doors.

Jo was escorted to Iona Glenn's office.

Armed escorts. Jo tightened her muscles. The fear they created around them didn't help matters. The whole school stunk of fear. Locked doors and windows made it worse. No one could escape. She was trapped with whatever bullies might run the school today. There was nowhere for students to hide from bullies their own age now. They couldn't sneak out a window, or door, and return in a safe manner. They were trapped, like sardines, inside with them.

Zadema, Chris, and even Lennie had told her how cold and frightened those long halls now were. As if all hope had long been lost. What had once been a bright and sunny place was now dark, dank, and rancid.

The guard opened the door and waved her inside. The grin on his face was not friendly.

She stepped inside.

Iona sat at the table with a young woman beside her. This young woman had long braids of black hair that curled on the ends.

She hid her face in her own crossed arms. Her head moved as if she sobbed, although no sound escaped.

Iona waved Jo toward an empty seat.

Jo sat down.

"Shalona, Jo is here."

Shalona looked up at Jo. "He promised me."

"What did he promise?"

"Not to hurt my sister if I let him do what he wanted to me." She buried her head and cried.

Jo covered her eyes. It was bad. It wasn't enough. Almost. Not enough information.

Iona nodded to her. "Come into the next room with me."

"Don't leave me." Shalona didn't lift her head.

"I'm not. We are going to step through this door into my inner office for one minute. I'll leave the door open if you want."

Shalona sobbed.

Jo followed her into the inner room.

"I have enough evidence. We know their phone is bugged. We have to take them out now. No waiting. Call Heidi's number. She makes a charity donation this time of year. If she's paying attention, we will rescue her and her daughters."

"We tell her?"

"Tell her to put the bags on the porch and the scouts will be by." Iona walked back into the other room.

It was risky. This might be one of the riskier rescues so far. She dialed the number Iona had handed her.

"Yes."

"Ms. Darsh?"

"Yes."

"I'm calling about the local clothing charity drive. We'll be picking up this afternoon. Do you have any clothes to donate this year?"

Silence. "I will have a bag in an hour."

"The scouts will pick them up."

"Okay." The line held for at least a minute before Ms. Darsh hung up.

Jo walked back into the other room. "We better go now. Chris is waiting outside. We will go in the van Shalona. Iona will bring Trible."

"What about mom?"

"We are going to pick her up. Now."

Shalona nodded. "He won't hurt her more, will he?"

"Not if I can help it. Let's go." She held out her hand to the young woman.

Shalona reached for her hand tentatively. "Scared."

"I know." Jo opened the door. The armed guard stood there.

"Jo is to take this student with her." Iona stepped up behind them. "See to it that they both make it safely to their van."

The guard gave her a dirty look. He led the way.

Outside, Jo helped Shalona into the van. A few minutes later, Iona walked up with a smaller girl. The little girl jumped in and hugged Shalona.

"I was afraid they'd take you away." She wailed.

"This woman promised to take us to mom, and safety." Shalona patted her younger sister's long dark braids.

Iona handed her an address.

The radio speaker beeped that Chris was ready.

Rescue

Jo drove to the address. Intuition told her this was a dangerous assignment. There was nothing that Gustonian Darsh had done to lead her to believe it. Except the tapped phone lines.

The house looked like a normal house in a healthy neighborhood. No sign of distress.

Shalona and Trible hid below the windows in the van. "The cameras might see us. Can't have that." Shalona hugged her sister tight. "How much did he hurt you?"

"He pulled my clothes off at bedtime. Didn't like it."

Shalona held Trible tight against her chest. "He promised me he wouldn't do it to you."

Jo wanted to close her eyes and ears and not hear the words that followed.

A woman stepped out of the house with two trash bags. She walked casually to the van.

Jo rolled down the window. "Heidi Darsh?"

She nodded and opened the door. She crawled in with the bags. "Hurry. I think he knows we're leaving."

Jo tapped the radio speaker to verify Chris had heard.

He tapped back.

Heidi tossed the bags behind the girls. She hugged them tight to her chest.

Jo drove out of the neighborhood. The highway was close. Once they reached it, Chris could stay right behind them without drawing suspicion.

The highway was in sight.

A truck with a double cab pulled up next to them and weaved at the van.

Jo pulled onto the highway. She tapped the radio speaker.

Heidi pulled the girls down low. "He's crazy!"

Jo fought to keep control of the vehicle as the truck played chicken trying to push them off the road. "Has he always been like this?"

"Only recently. Not sure what happened." Heidi rocked back and forth holding the girls.

Chris pulled up, lights and sirens blasting.

The girls cried.

Jo fought to maintain control of the vehicle. She slowed down. The truck swerved to cut her off into a ditch. She hit the brakes.

The truck stopped. A man jumped out and ran at the van. "You can't kidnap my wife."

Heidi covered the girls so he couldn't see them.

Chris parked.

He jumped up and tried to climb in the window. "You kidnapped my daughters too!"

Chris ran up to grab him.

"You won't take them. They are mine to do with as I please!"

"You don't own them." Jo pulled away from the window.

The man lifted one arm. He had a gun.

She ducked.

The van jerked as a bullet hit the side.

The sound of the fight outside was covered by the women crying in the van. "Are you hit?"

No one responded.

Jo unbuckled and slid to the floor seats.

Heidi held her daughters close. No sign of blood. They were safest in the floor.

Another shot ricocheted outside.

A scream.

Jo covered her ears.

Release

Weeks passed.

Gustonian Darsh recovered enough from a gunshot wound to be charged with multiple charges.

It was over a year before the trial.

Heidi Darsh and her daughters attended the trial from the safety of the new village in Alabama, which they helped build. They had all suffered, though they would recover now.

All through the trial he claimed his right to sexually abuse his adopted daughters. He claimed he had paid for them, so they existed to do his bidding. He lamented that he hadn't gone as far with Trible as with Shalona. He had held off as she was too perfect, and he wanted to keep her that way. The trial ended with him convicted and spending most of the rest of his life in prison, if his sentence was not reduced, as happened all too often.

Chapter 36

Lennie - Floriana Bello - Year 18

Lennie's coffee cooled beside him. The case open in front of him had blurred out of reality. His mind drifted back to that day. That day Anne had told him she was worthless and had to marry Kyle because she was pregnant with his baby. She had claimed she had never been good enough for Lennie, and never would be. Anne had begged him to marry Jo and have as many children as he wanted. A tear dropped off his cheek to land on a paper. The tear stain would join the coffee stains of days, and nights past.

No notification of where the other half of his heart was. If she were alive, or dead.

The young woman in the file in front of him was almost young enough to be his daughter. His and Anne's if she had married him instead of that Kyle Mold.

This young woman was as full of self-loathing, and was sure the community around her despised her. Except the mother who reported her to him. And begged Lennie to rescue Floriana from Pastor Stork, and save the children, Ivan and Isadora, from a life of abandonment and self-abuse.

Pastor Stork. Jo and Ashley Chardell had warned him about this religious man. Jo had rescued a few other people from him, and his church that regaled in pregnant young women. After their babies were born, they were less kind to the mother, unless she became pregnant again within a few months. These stories were never good. A case for Chris, if it didn't involve potentially consenting adults.

He checked the birthdate of Floriana and her children. Floriana had not been a legal consenting adult when her children were conceived, or born.

Case File

Focus: Floriana Bello, female, age 19
Reporter: Ileana Bello, female, age 43
Abuser: Community
Abuse type: Victim Blaming, Sexual, Religious
Family:
Mother - Ileana Bello, female, age 43
Daughter - Isadora, female, age 4
Son - Ivan, female, age 4

Interview

Lennie arrived at the home of Ileana Bello. A nice quiet home on a nice quiet street, in a town he didn't know well. Jo had spent more time here than he had. This case rightfully belonged to her. Only, she was in Alabama, and wouldn't be back unless necessary.

He walked up and knocked on the door.

A woman in a nurse's uniform answered the door. "Yes?"

"I'm here to see Ms. Bello."

"Come in. She is resting. I'm about to leave. Are you able to lock the door on your way out?"

Lennie nodded. He followed her into the living room.

A woman dozed on a hospital bed nestled between a couch and two chairs.

"Ileana, someone is here to see you."

The woman lifted her head. "Mr. Darendale?"

"Yes, I've come to see you."

The nurse nodded and left the room. The front door clicked softly behind her.

"Sit."

"Are you strong enough?"

"I won't be stronger. You'll be my confessor."

"I'm not a priest."

"I'm not religious."

He sat on the chair next to her and reached his hand out to the bed to steady himself.

She grabbed his hand and held tight. Her grip belied her frail appearance. "I blame myself for my daughter, as she blames herself."

"Tell me."

"When she was twelve, she begged to go to church with her friend, I let her go. That friend left years ago. Her mother pulled her out and they disappeared. We never saw her again. Floriana continued to go to church and idolized Pastor Stork." The wasted curls hung damp around Ileana's head and didn't move as the air conditioner shifted on noisily.

"At fourteen, she was pregnant. I didn't believe her when she said she didn't know who she had been with. She didn't have boyfriends. Pastor Stork took her to church, and to church outings."

Lennie grasped her hand.

"Pastor Stork demanded she marry and have the baby. He picked out a twenty-one-year-old man for her to marry."

"Twenty-one? She was fourteen?"

"Not legal. At all. I fought it. I told him no. I'd have Floriana have an abortion. No fourteen-year-old with a baby will succeed in life the way our society is structured."

"Did you want her to have the baby?"

"No. She didn't know who the father was. She was too young. Her father died when she was a toddler. I wouldn't want her to wait too many years, or raise a child on her own."

"What happened next?"

"Floriana begged me to let her have the baby. She'd raise it. I suggested she adopt it out. She said she'd think about it."

"That didn't happen."

"No. She had twins. Isadora and Ivan." Ileana Bello breathed deep. "Even I couldn't give up my beautiful grandchildren. The only ones I will ever know."

Lennie squeezed her hand. Words could say so little. Now was not the time to share how close to home this story hit him.

"I insisted on a genetic test. Floriana couldn't fight it, as she was only fifteen. Thanks to a few others who have worked with your organization, we know the father."

Lennie closed his eyes. "Pastor Stork."

"How many children has he fathered?" She shifted her legs under the thin sheet.

"I have no idea."

"He kept demanding Floriana marry and have more children. I found out, he was forcing her to have sex with him at least once a week if she refused to marry."

"That's scary." Lennie closed his eyes.

"He invited her to parties where he'd do this to several of the young women her age in one night. He'd tell them they had to have at least a dozen babies a piece to repopulate the country."

"Are they all under age?"

"A few. I suspect he is working with younger girls the way he did with her. In private." She closed her eyes. "I'd never give up my grandchildren. They are light on my last few years of life."

"You can recover, can't you?"

"The doctors have given me less than six weeks to live. My hospice nurse could have told you that. The cancer will take me. Don't let that cancer of a pastor take my only daughter and grandchildren!"

A cancer. Pastor Stork was a cancer and a blight on the state of Arizona. His name fit him, although it probably wasn't his real name.

"How are your grandchildren?"

Ileana closed her eyes. "Isadora is a sweet, soft, young lady of four. She has no friends, and no interests beyond pleasing me."

Lennie wiggled. That wasn't healthy. At four, she might be okay, if she were removed. "Does she know who her father is?"

"He demands the children come to church. Floriana promises me they are not left alone with him."

"That may not be enough."

"I know. I called you as soon as I had enough evidence that he should hang."

Those were strong words.

"Ivan. My beautiful Ivan. He was a sweet infant. When he reached the terrible twos, he never emerged. Everyone is terrified of him. Even his own mother. Floriana despises him and Isadora. They remind her of what was done to her. She won't see that by flinching at his sight, she makes him worse. By flinching at the sight

of her daughter, she causes her daughter to retreat into the shell that could land beautiful Isadora in the same position in a few years."

"Why hasn't she left him, and the church?"

"I don't know what hold he has on her. I know survivors of sexual predators feel as if there is no escape. Better the villain they know than one they don't."

"What do you want for your daughter?"

"When I die, and that'll be soon, I want her to know peace. Peace with no contact with Pastor Stork. For her, or her children. I want Isadora and Ivan safe. Even if she must live without them until she feels safe herself. Will you do that for me?"

"You think Ivan and Isadora need to stay together, and separate from Floriana?"

"Yes. For a time. She may never be ready to see them."

"I don't want to take them away from you."

"I don't want them to see me die. I'll have four years of memories. I'd rather have hope for them. For a future. If you wait until I die, I don't trust Floriana. How can I say I don't trust my own daughter?" The woman wailed.

Lennie understood. Pastor Stork was dangerous. There was no telling what he would convince Floriana to do. "Where are they right now?"

Ileana wiped her eyes. "Floriana is working at a grocery store. Ivan and Isadora are at a daycare nearby. Take them. I don't even dare say goodbye. "

"What about their clothes and toys?" This was Chris and Jo's job. Not his.

"They need a new life. Without the past. Take nothing of theirs." She pulled out a stack of papers from under the sheet.

The first was the paternity test results. A few other pages showed how dangerous Pastor Stork was, and what he intended to do with the children. Create a religious army to overthrow those who chose not to belong to his religious group.

"You only have a few days. Go." Ileana closed her eyes.

The next page had the documentation for him to pick up the children at the daycare.

Rescue

Chris was a block away. He'd have to be careful. Who had been helping Ileana? If Floriana had found out, the situation could go bad in a hurry. Lennie closed the door behind him.

Inside his car, he radioed to Chris where to meet.

Within minutes, he was at the daycare. He handed Chris the paperwork, all of it.

Chris walked in with him to pick up the children.

Isadora was easy to spot. She looked much like her grandmother, tiny, wasted, greasy hair, and slumped in a corner.

Ivan raged around the room, throwing items off of shelves, running into children, and shoving the adults.

The woman who took the paper looked at them. "I'm sorry to say I won't miss them."

She walked over to Isadora, and talked to her.

Isadora didn't look up. She stood up with her eyes on the floor as the woman led her to them.

Lennie took the little girl's hand. "Will you come with me?"

"Will you hurt me?"

A pain stabbed his heart. What had this child suffered? "I won't hurt you. No one will."

"Will my brother come?"

"Do you want him to?"

She shook her head and then nodded.

Lennie closed his eyes. The children may have to be separated. Ileana would understand. He walked the girl out to his car. She could go to the Home Track Village.

Chris stepped out a moment later with Ivan. He jerked and pulled away. He put him in the back of his patrol car. The boy tried to open the door and break the window.

Chris radioed. "Janella."

"Understood." Lennie drove to the Home Track Village.

Chris would follow until they were inside.

Later, they'd have to go back to rescue Floriana from Pastor Stork's clutches. Her, and all the other young women he had condemned to a life of fear and unwelcome sex.

Release

Ileana's paperwork had saved them months, maybe years of time.

Pastor Stork was arrested mid-act with a dozen young women, including Floriana Bello, two nights later. Her report was that he planned this party to help her forget losing her children. The young woman he had on the bed when arrested was under sixteen.

That meant that all the people there would be charged. Most would be cleared on technicalities, as they had found no safe way to escape. Once such abuse starts at such a young age, few believe it is occurring until the woman is pregnant. And then she is blamed for being pregnant, as if she didn't do enough to stop the grooming from the predator. These women are denied jobs, safe places to live, and a decent future.

That was what the Underground Railroad Project had been designed to prevent.

Karen managed to have the women split up and sent to Home Track, and the new village in Alabama, giving them a chance to begin new lives while waiting on their trial.

Ileana Bello died three days after Floriana was sent to Alabama to live. At her request, her burial was quiet, and her grandchildren were told that that their grandmother had died. That encouraged them.

Chapter 37

Jo - Wendell Ansen - Year 19

Jo closed her computer. Another house barrack would be built soon. Barracks was the best they could be called. Ten women crowded into a building, with small individual rooms partitioned off, a larger common area and kitchen, with a stall type bathroom set up. Not the best situation. It was similar to other abuse survivor shelters in the state. Someday, they'd do better here.

She had been in Alabama for a few months. Most of the people at this village were those she had brought with her. A few locals, like Jalindel, had joined them. Jalindel's strong accent made communication interesting.

She had grown used to most of her accent by now. Before coming to Alabama, Jo had never thought an accent could be so difficult to comprehend. It almost sounded like another language the way Jalindel's words ebbed and flowed when she chatted to delivery truck drivers.

"Jo." Jalindel walked up to her. "I need to talk to you."

Jo glanced at her. Jalindel was about her age, and had not explained why she wanted to work with them. Maybe now she would find out. The typically fiery woman seemed quiet and withdrawn.

"Sit and tell me."

Jalindel ignored the request. She paced back and forth."I knew they despised him. They'll fire him."

"Who?"

"Crazy brother. He's not so crazy, is he? They make fun of him. Boss told him to do things that will get him fired."

Jo leaned back as the woman's voice escalated to reverberate off the walls. "What is his name?"

"Wendall Ansen. You have to help him."

"How?"

"Can you rescue him?"

"Is he in danger?"

"He could help us here. Doesn't fit there. Or any job he's worked. They told him to shout instead of write at work."

Shouting? That could lead to worse than firing. There wouldn't be much Jo could do until she met him.

"They told him he couldn't do so many things, I'm not sure what he can do anymore."

"Give me his home address. I'll go see him."

"I'll bring him here. Please."

"How about the other women? Most of them have been sexually abused by men." Jo tried not to glare at Jalindel.

"He will wear a dress then. He likes to. They won't know the difference. I promise."

Jo closed her eyes. "No. You know we don't allow anyone to wear a dress here."

"Please."

"He may come. You must stay with him."

"Even talking to you?"

"Yes please. I need to meet him." She reached for an empty coffee cup.

"Are you afraid of my brother?"

"I don't know him. I am not afraid of him."

"You won't talk to him alone."

"Jalindel. I don't know him. What is the first rule we teach women?"

She looked down. "Never talk to a man alone. He doesn't act like other men."

"Doesn't matter. Anyway, there are things he may forget, that you will remember to help us decide if we can help him."

Jalindel gave her a strange, non-trusting look.

Racism ran rampant here. Jalindel was nonverbally accusing her of it. If his accent was as thick as his sister's she'd need translation. No different than if he were a refugee from a foreign country. No matter what anyone said, she wouldn't be seen by other women breaking the number one rule they taught for human safety.

Why were accents so different? It made sense in the days when long distance travel was less common. With television and radio over one hundred years old, it was difficult to believe they could be

so different. In many places, they were the last tie to nearly forgotten, almost extinct, geographical cultures.

Part of saving people had to include allowing them to hold on to their cultural identity, while leaving the abuse behind. If most of the people who spoke the same dialect as themselves lived and worked in say, a two-mile radius of the abuser, that would be difficult.

Case File

Focus: Wendell Ansen, male, age 28, works at a factory.
Reporter: Jalindel Ansen, female, age 36
Abuser: Citial Dransom, male, age 32
Kearella Sheldon, female, age 30)
Abuse type: Workplace Bullying
Family:
Sister - Jalindel Ansen, female age 36

Interview

Jo waited in her office with an empty coffee cup. Hot tea would be better. The tea box was empty.

Wendell would arrive soon. She had read the report Jalindel had given him. In anticipation of the visit, she had even called his employer, as if he had given them as a reference for a new job.

Her stomach ached when she heard the words of his supervisor, Citial Dransom. He had called Wendell a decent worker who kept to himself. Except that others wouldn't leave him alone. An incident that day had been reported by a fellow worker, Kearella Sheldon, that he had opened the women's restroom door and walked part way in while she was in there. And that wasn't all. He tended to turn in work well written. The pages were out of order and upside down. The list went on and on. Rant after rant about little incident after little incident.

Citial Dransom made a few rude jokes about Wendell. Ones she wouldn't repeat. The call was recorded per Karen's instructions. The supervisor knew his words were recorded.

Rescue

Jalindel knocked at the open door. "Here." She stepped in.

Behind her stood a tall, thin man. He looked out of place. Scared. His hands moved constantly, as if he didn't know where to put them. They ended up in his pockets as he sat in the chair beside his sister.

"You must be Wendell?"

He nodded.

"You may speak. I don't bite. Often." Jo smiled. Putting a man like this at ease was difficult. The call had made it worse. Did he do these things intentionally, or absentmindedly? Or were pranksters destructing his work? Perhaps he had a medical condition, or more than one.

"Sis said you will give me a job. One that is better than the factory."

"Better pay, or better for you?"

"Both I hope."

"What do you like to do?"

He tilted his head and looked at her with one eye. "Like to do? I don't remember. I've worked as much as I could for ten years."

"Tell me about your jobs."

Wendell sputtered and worked his way through a list of jobs that made no sense. He'd been a stock clerk at three grocery stores, two delis, and a gas station. As well as having worked his current factory job, and three others.

Jo held up her hand. "You have a college degree? Why so many low wage jobs?"

He wrung his hands. "Yeah. I have a degree. I don't have the experience required for those jobs without a job doing the job I'm not qualified for, since I haven't done it before. I could. If they'd let me."

She smiled. Common problem. "You lost multiple jobs?"

"They find they no longer need me. They never tell me why. They refuse to. I'm honest, on time, early, and stay late as needed. No one works as hard as I do, or as many hours. If I ask for a day off for a doctor appointment, someone else gets it instead. They

want to sleep in. The laziest workers are allowed the most days off. If I need a day off, they threaten to fire me."

Not uncommon. Males had more leeway than females. In fact, males almost never had that much of a problem. Abused females without children were more likely to be forced to bounce from job to job without any stability.

"Do you have a resume?" He had asked for a job.

He reached into a pocket and pulled out his phone. "I have it on my phone. What email can I send it to?"

She shared the address.

He turned on his phone and worked with it a few minutes. "Should be there."

"I'll check it out later. Is there anything I need to know about you to help me make a decision about hiring you?"

"Nothing special about me."

An honest answer. It was refreshing. Some people would be put off by it, assuming he was hiding something.

Jalindel ushered him out.

Jo watched the screens as they left the village. Obviously, she berated her brother the whole way. As they reached the gate, Jo turned to the resume. It was a mess. Typical jobs appropriate for a high school dropout. Not a college graduate.

She called his previous employers to find out if they would recommend him being hired. After calling seven on the list, it seemed they all agreed that he was an honest hard worker, arrived early, stayed late, and never did any work wrong. People couldn't communicate with him. He wouldn't joke, smile, put down others, cuss, or anything. He stared at anything unnecessary to do the job required.

She asked a few why he wasn't promoted to a more suitable position. The answer seemed to be that Wendell couldn't communicate enough with his co-workers to be able to lead them.

Although, the ways he communicated were the ways leaders communicated. Except for his nervousness. Which the constant job loss had exacerbated.

Jalindel returned. "What can you do for Wendell?"

"You have enough strength for both of you. I'm trying to think of something that would work. I'll need to check a few places."

"You have other villages."

"I know." Jo sat her coffee cup beside her computer. "He doesn't so much need to be a client, as to have a job."

"He needs self-esteem." Jalindel paced in the tiny space between chairs.

"Yes. I think he has it. He needs someone to say thank-you, and you did a good job a few times, instead of the opposite."

"How long will you take?"

"It's been an hour Jalindel. If his life were in danger, I'd have kept him here. It isn't in danger. No one is going to hurt him. Do tell him to give his two weeks' notice. I expect they will tell him not to go back to work."

Jalindel raced out of the tiny office.

A spitfire. Someone who could be trained to take her place, if she retired. Although, she was almost too spitty. Wendell would do better, if his attitude could be improved. He would commiserate better with the survivors, regardless of gender. Someone would need to be here to help talk to the male survivors of abuse. Between him and Jalindel, it would work out well. In time.

Release

Wendell's employer did tell him not to bother to report to work. Which led to a sputtering tirade from Jalindel.

Jo allowed Wendell to work with his sister for a few months, before sending him to the newest village in Colorado. There, he joined Janella and Morna Blair to build and renovate a former factory and truck depot into a village safe for women and children.

Chapter 38

Lennie - Bendy Sheldon - Year 19

Lennie wiped the coffee rings off his desk. His office would be painted over the weekend. It would be nice to start a new week in a fresh clean office. His phone buzzed. He dropped the rag beside Anne's photo. It was in a new frame, although it looked the same.

"Hey Lennie. Rough one here. Good friend of mine. Please come up to the school." Iona Glenn's voice faded in and out as if the phone pulled away from her mouth.

"Serious?"

"Yes and no. We don't need Chris, if that's what you mean."

"Be there in half an hour."

"Good."

Anne's eyes stared from the picture, as if she waited to hear his words. He grabbed the cleaning rag and wiped a few more coffee rings off his desk as his laptop shut down.

Case File

Focus: Bendy Sheldon, school cook, female, age 32
Reporter: Iona Glenn, school counselor, female, age 39
Abuser: Insurance Company
Abuse type: Lack of insurance and medical care - Fibromyalgia
Family:
Daughter - Heather Sheldon, female, age 13

Interview

The walk to Iona's office was uninviting. The smell of fear steeped the hallways. Students dashed down corridors to escape the sight of the guard by his side.

Lennie sighed. There had been a day he dreamed of walking these corridors as a social worker. Staying after checking on a client, to walk through the halls and talk to students. Catch them in their natural rushed state to see who might need a little assistance here, maybe a new jacket, or a few meals for someone whose

parents were too sick to cook. That couldn't happen anymore. He was required to arrive during classes, and not allowed to speak to students, except in Iona's office. When he had been a student, the local social worker did walk through the halls with students, joking, laughing, and checking up on the less fortunate.

Ghost Valley and Home Track Village were more like the world he remembered. Even if only survivors lived there.

Iona stood outside her office door. "Glad to see you. Come on in."

He followed her in and sat down.

A woman sat there in a cook's uniform. He had seen her before, during a few student rescues.

Iona sat a cup of tea by his elbow. "This is Bendy Sheldon. I'll let her tell you her own story. She's been my friend for two decades. She's worked here since college. She's the dietary specialist, and leads all the other cooks." The chair she pulled out squeaked as she sat down.

Bendy Sheldon adjusted in her seat. Her straight back leaned at an odd angle.

"Is this about you, or a student?"

"Both. Myself and my daughter. Heather is thirteen and doesn't deserve this disruption for her mother."

"Disruption?"

"I'm sick all the time. A few years ago, I became tired daily, and had trouble communicating by bedtime. We ignored it, too much was going on then."

Lennie nodded, that was about the time the Underground Railroad Project formed their plans with Ruby Duffy.

"Now, by lunchtime, I can't focus. I messed up the order, and we didn't have the food we needed last week. I gave three gluten intolerant children the wrong meal myself by mistake."

"That's not good."

"The aches and the pains are worse than my grandmother's pain is. She's almost eighty. Some days I can't walk. She figure skates!"

Lennie sipped his tea. "What do the doctors say?"

"They thought it was a cold, or the flu. As the years passed, they passed it off on age, even though it doesn't make sense. They told

me to lose weight. I've been the correct weight for my height for years. Move more. I walk 20,000 steps a day, and only sit down maybe twenty minutes while at work for eight hour days. I even type my reports standing up."

"That's not right at all."

"No. When my eyes quit working right, I went to a few specialists in Albuquerque last summer."

"What did they say?"

"That it was all in my head." Bendy slammed her fist on the table. "I don't want this. Not for me. Or my daughter. It isn't fair to her. She can't go anywhere or do anything because I'm not able to function after work."

"And no one will help?"

"That's where we need you. I finally found a support group online. They sent me a form for my doctor. It must have 150 symptoms. I have over 100 documented on that list."

"That is quite a few symptoms."

"It is. I didn't go back to the last specialist. He told me to go see a dietician. Guess he didn't realize I am one. Found a special specialist. He is sure I have Fibromyalgia. He thinks I need to go on Social Security Disability." She lowered her head. "I don't want to. If I thought I would recover, I wouldn't. I don't want to lose Heather's growing up years. Or her to lose them either."

"What do you need?"

"It's complicated. This doctor says I need a lawyer. Maybe two. He's seen single mothers lose their children in the fight for recognition of Fibromyalgia. He thinks I need a lawyer on standby to keep Heather as my daughter."

Lennie sighed. It had happened. There were cases every day of parents deemed unfit to parent due to illness. Particularly illnesses that could not be easily recognized by a medical test or examination. It wasn't supposed to happen. Those children ended up in worse homes than the ones they were removed from.

"You need Karen to help you keep Heather at home. And a Social Security lawyer too?"

"Yes. I've most of my paperwork gathered. I need a couple of more weeks to be sure. Since I only have the time and energy to work on it during weekends."

Bendy closed her eyes. "I don't want this. I can't safely do my job anymore."

"What will you tell Social Security when they ask you to re-train for another job?"

"If I can't do something as simple as what I have been doing for a dozen years, how will I do anything? I'm not physically able to do physical work anymore. I need a cane to pull myself out of bed most mornings."

Bendy looked younger than her age. She looked like a healthy thirty-two-year-old woman. As if she could run the Boston Marathon any day. Lennie recognized the traits of a multitude of invisible illness cases he had worked in the woman in front of him. One whom society would have considered successful, until recently.

Although, if he listened close, her breathing didn't sound quite right. Her eyes were a little too bright, and hair lacked the luster that should be there in a healthy person.

"I've tried to help her." Iona patted her friend's hand. "We've tried everything. Nothing helps. We know she has Fibromyalgia. And it tends to be co-morbid with so many other illnesses. We don't know what hasn't been diagnosed that should have been. Perhaps, if she had been overweight, the doctors might have taken her symptoms more seriously."

"Or at least something would have shown up on the tests. Please help me." Bendy leaned toward him. "For me and Heather."

"I will. It won't be easy."

Bendy leaned back. "I need to go back to the cafeteria. It's going to be another long day." She stood slowly and leaned on the table. Her steps to the door were unsteady.

The door clicked shut behind her.

"She has tried everything."

Lennie sipped his tea. "I've seen many invisible disease cases in my case loads. Fibromyalgia and CFS cases don't turn out well. At least she has been lucky and had a steady job."

Iona closed her eyes. "I haven't the heart to let her know. The district wants to fire her. She has used so much sick time, missed days. Accidentally not ordering enough food. Now the mix ups with the food allergy kids. I'm not sure how much longer I will be able to convince them to keep her job."

"I didn't know you were in a position to make those decisions."

"Normally not. I know about her case. I've begged them to wait. Is it better to wait and obtain help through the long process, or allow her to be fired?"

Bendy and Heather without an income for months, possibly years, until Social Security could be convinced to help them was not the best solution for Bendy or Heather, mentally, emotionally, or financially. It was the quickest way to continued care. Otherwise, Social Security tended to drag their feet if they thought the person, or any family member, could work.

"Let me talk to Karen. It'll be a few days. Call me immediately if they decide to fire her. Oh, and I need to know, does she own her house, make mortgage payments, or pay rent?"

"She owns her house. Not sure about mortgage payments. When her husband died, he may have the mortgage that paid itself off. I'm not sure."

"Find out please, and let me know." Lennie swallowed the rest of his tea and left the room to be escorted back outside by the guard.

Rescue

Lennie's conversation with Karen did not go as he hoped. Once the process began, it would take a year or more, and even with the lawyer she could be required to go through multiple appeals. Five years might pass before this process was complete. It would require multiple visits to specialists, and Social Security Disability doctors.

Heather would be an adult and out on her own before her mother received the help she so badly needed. Heather would miss most of her teenage years. True, Heather would be learning things like cleaning the house, cooking, taking care of bills, and yardwork. She would not be able to go out with friends, or learn to drive. She would miss most of the social development of the teenage years. Heather did not deserve this. Nor, did Bendy.

Lenny spoke with the Social Security disability lawyer. His advice, wasn't helpful. He recommended that Bendy stop working, or be fired. If she was fired, she would qualify for unemployment benefits and educational benefits to go back to college and receive

more training for another job. That could lead to a hold on the case until it was determined if she could work by an undetermined multitude of potential employers.

Lennie felt lost.

As did Iona.

He decided to return to Iona's office and speak with Heather.

Bendy Sheldon agreed that it was okay for Lennie to speak to her daughter in Iona's presence. She would be working in the cafeteria, a short distance away.

Lennie's arrival was typical. He had to wait for a security guard to escort him to Iona's office.

Heather and Iona waited for him.

"Heather, I'm going to ask you an odd string of questions. They are vital, and may change order based on your answers."

The teen leaned forward. "I want to help my mom. What can I do?"

"Not much right now. You deserve to be a teen."

"The kids laugh at me. Mom hasn't had time to take me shopping for new clothes. Ms. Glenn said she would this weekend."

"This weekend? How long has it been?"

Heather hid her eyes. "Not sure. My aunt took me last time. She died a year ago."

Lennie sighed. "Are you happy here?"

"No. The kids make fun of mom. I've told them not to. They don't listen. Then, they tease me."

At thirteen that could be serious. Too many cases of what happened to teens who were teased, and tried to protect their parent. "Do you have any friends here?"

"In the special needs room."

Iona nodded. "She spends a good deal of time in there. The teachers send her there when the kids are too mean to her."

"Would you like to work with others who need help?"

Heather leaned back. "I need to finish school so I can take care of mom."

"If you worry too much now, you may end up disabled by her age. I will help you both."

"How?"

"I will send you to the Home Track Village. You will both live there, and have what you need, until the Social Security Disability system will help her, and you."

"You could do that?"

"Sure. You will finish school online. Your mom will help out. She will complete online schooling to meet the requirements for Social Security Disability."

"Does mom know?"

"We had to ask you. It's your life she is worried about. And us."

"I'd go. Would I make new friends?"

"Yes."

Heather jumped up. "I'll go tell her now!" She ran out of the room.

Release

The days passed. They turned into weeks.

Bendy Sheldon was able to train a replacement. She and Heather spent Spring Break moving to the Home Track Village with the help of Zadema, and a few other teens that Iona knew from another school. They would be safe there, until the Social Security System made their decision.

Chapter 39

Hayden Walters

Janella called Jo and left her a message.

The message was clear. Another person was left without the ability to be mobile in their community. A forty-five-year-old man named Hayden Walters had recently lost his lower right leg to diabetes. He was in a wheelchair. His home was accessible. His community and vehicle were not. No sidewalks. The community said no sidewalks were needed as he could drive if he had an accessible vehicle. Which he did not.

This meant, he had no access to jobs, the grocery store, doctor appointments, or to visit family or friends.

Not that he had any family or friends. They were all long gone. His job was lost. Without transportation, they wouldn't hold it for him. No city transportation, busses, or any other form. A taxi cost more than his daily income.

He was locked in his home with nowhere to go, no way out, and no one to come and visit. No grocery stores delivered. His power, internet, phone, and water were set to be shut off in the next week. Social Security said a wheelchair was no excuse to not work. They refused to help, or even to fund a transportation option, including a wheelchair accessible van he could drive. They claimed providing a wheelchair was all they had to do.

No one would even help him find a job, and relocate him to a region where he could travel in his wheelchair. Every agency said it was someone else's job. They claimed Hayden Walters needed to get up, and do it for himself.

Which was nice in theory. Except, it wouldn't work. His other health problems prevented excessively exerting himself.

Case File

Focus: Hayden Walters, male, age 45, in a wheelchair, needs sidewalks, community refuses
Reporter: Janella Lamar, female, age 39
Abuser: Community
Abuse type: Community Bullying
Family: None

Interview

Jo waited until she had calmed down enough to even contact Karen.

Her long-time friend would only be able to help her so much. Legally, there was little Karen herself could do, other than contact the Social Security disability lawyers that she used, and have them contact a local Social Security disability lawyer for Hayden Walters in his own community.

Wasn't much. It was a starting point. While Karen worked on locating a local Social Security disability lawyer, Jo contacted Hayden Walters to interview him.

When she called, Hayden was excited to be able to speak to someone, if it would help him.

Jo and Janella arrived at Hayden Walter's home. The yard was uncut. A tiny car sat in the driveway. Covered in dust. The home itself looked to be in decent condition.

There was no entrance ramp for Janella to ride up in her wheelchair. She pushed her chair up to the porch. It was two steps. Two steps too many for her to be able to go in, or out, of the home. Their ramp was too wide for to fit between the handrails.

It was a few moments until time for their appointment. Jo knocked on the door. There was no sound from behind the door.

Janella waited at the bottom of the steps.

In a few moments, the door handle turned and opened. A man was in a wheelchair on the other side of the door. He turned the chair back and forth to open the door. "Sorry, I'm not used to using this chair. Not sure if I ever will be."

"How did you go into the home when you arrived?"

"An ambulance brought me home from the rehabilitation center. It took three men to carry me up those two steps."

"Janella is with me. How is she going to come up the steps?"

"I didn't know you had anyone in a wheelchair who worked for you."

"Janella needed to come to assess your situation."

"I'm sure she can see it. I'm not sure how she can go in the house."

"We'll find a way. Our removable ramp won't fit your steps."

"There may be good boards in the garage. I will open the door and you can check."

Jo glanced over at the closed garage door. "Janella would a board work?"

"Not the safest option. We will try it."

The door raised.

Jo walked over and looked inside. There were woodworking tools, a nice workbench, and a few tubs of odds and ends nearby. There was a nice lumber rack. Several sheets of plywood, 2 x 4's, and even a couple of 4 x 4's. She collected two 4 x 4's and carried them outside. With a little work, and know how they could be used to make a ramp. She laid one on each side of the steps. And then returned for a piece of plywood. She placed the plywood on the 4 x 4's. It wasn't much, and not sturdy enough to last.

"I think it'll work." Janella rolled up toward it. "It needs to be properly nailed. The wood needs to be treated to prevent rotting."

She pushed her chair up onto the porch. "It worked."

Hayden clapped from inside. "I could've made it myself. If I had before I lost my foot. It needs a good 20 hours' worth of work in order to be safe and to remain there at all times. Like that, a good stiff wind would blow it apart. As it is, I can't move the boards by myself in my chair."

"We should be here an hour or so." Jo followed Janella inside the house and closed the door behind her.

Inside, the house was in decent shape. There were items on the floor that Hayden obviously could not reach to pick up. The surfaces that he could reach were in decent condition. It wasn't dirty. A little cluttered, which was not uncommon, for someone who needed help and didn't have any.

"I've read your case report. What more can you tell us?" Jo sat on a couch next to the window.

Hayden laughed. "Wasn't my report enough?"

"Do you know anyone who could build a ramp for you?"

Hayden shook his head. "At this point, even if I could have the ramp prepared, it wouldn't be enough. I don't have sidewalks, or a vehicle that I could travel in. I'd be stuck in the house. I could make it as far as the driveway and that be it. There'd be no public transportation here."

"May I look around?" Janella wheeled toward an inner door.

"Sure. Be careful."

Janella returned a few minutes later. "With a bathroom set up like that, how are you cleaning yourself?"

Hayden looked the other way. "I'm using the hospital spittle bucket and a washcloth. I don't have any other options. They wouldn't even give me a prescription for a shower stool. Even if I could, I couldn't get on, or off one by myself. I can't afford a physical therapist to come out here to teach me how to do it correctly."

Janella nodded. "You don't have room to turn your chair in there to use a tub stool, or on and off the toilet."

"No. I don't. Don't ask. It isn't nice."

"Are you able to hobble around with crutches in the bathroom at least?"

"I do. I am afraid of falling. My arms are not as strong as they should be for that type of work. I need help. There is none here."

"Would you like to move?" Janella rolled to the window.

"I'd miss my home. I am willing to give it up to have a job. I miss being around people. It's lonely here without anyone to talk to. It's lonely here with only fast food delivery. I'm about out of money for that."

"Where would you like to go? What would you like to do?"

Janella rolled over next to Jo, and glanced out the window.

"I've thought about that. I want to go to a city big enough to have sidewalks and transportation. Maybe work in a retirement center. I miss my woodworking. I can't even ride into my garage due to the steps. I know I can adapt my tools, re-learn how to do it."

"That might work. We will contact you in a few days."

"I don't have long."

"I know. Have you contacted any communities?"

"Sure. I will email you the ones I've looked at. One offered to interview me. I have no way there."

"Will they let you interview online?"

"I'll ask."

Jo stood up. "I promise we will be back soon. Also, please send your bill information to us. At least electric, water, phone, and internet. Don't worry about the others."

"I will do that."

She walked to the door and held it open for Janella.

Janella rolled out and down the small ramp. She turned back to look at the door. "Would you like to come out here for a few minutes?"

"No. I wouldn't want to go back in. Please put the boards back up so you can use them next time."

Jo carried the boards back to the garage.

Hayden watched, without speaking. He closed the door as they pulled away.

Rescue

"I'm sure it's true. We can't take his word." Janella unstrapped her wheelchair from the van supports.

"I'm sure. City hall will be able to answer the local questions at least."

Janella wheeled out of the van into the parking lot.

A car whizzed past, and almost hit her.

"Happens too often. People don't see the ramp." Janella wheeled up to the building. "No ramp to the doors. Not a good sign."

Their portable ramp would work on these steps. It was heavy. Jo carried the two parts to the steps.

Janella followed behind. Their ramp would have been a little too wide to have worked on Hayden's steps.

She spread it out.

Janella rolled up. "Leave it until we come back."

"It might disappear."

"I'll wait for you." Her hands gripped the wheels until her knuckles turned white.

Jo covered her smile as she lifted and carried the ramp back to the van. This tiny town didn't know a hurricane had arrived to knock them off their feet.

Janella waited for her at the door. "Even the door is inaccessible."

Jo opened it. The hurricane gathered her force, and leapt her chair over the threshold.

An older woman stood behind a glass screen and stared down her long nose at them. The woman's glasses teetered on the tip of her nose. Her breath clouded the lenses. "What do you want here? This is no place for the lazy."

Janella moved her chair back and forth. Her face paled. "We are here to help a client of ours. He needs an accessible sidewalk in order to return to work."

"Sidewalks have been outlawed. They are a danger to drivers. They invite the homeless, drug addicts, and lazy people into the community. We have no place for such people here."

"You do know there are laws requiring accessibility into buildings, and in a community?"

"Safety regulations do not allow them here."

"You think your town is above the law?"

"We make the laws in this town. Go away. You are not welcome. If you won't stand up out of your chair, and work a job, you aren't needed here." The woman touched the glass with her nose.

Janella's chair spun toward the nearest door. "I need to see the mayor please."

"The mayor will not see anyone without an appointment. Obviously, no one so lazy as to arrive in a chair."

"He will see me."

"I will call the police if you don't leave right now."

Janella stared at her. "You will hear from several lawyers."

"You are too lazy to have a penny to spend on a lawyer." The woman picked up a phone.

Janella turned her chair back to the door.

Jo opened it and followed her out. "I'll get the ramp."

"Forget it. I'll go down the old-fashioned way." She bumped down the three steps to the walkway. "At least they have walkways to the buildings. I'll text Karen."

Karen. The words she would say would not be repeatable. Or on record. Jo knew this town was a hopeless cause for now. Until the law caught up with the leaders.

Release

Hayden's bills were covered for another month. And Jalindel was paid to take care of his grocery shopping and cleaning around the house until he could be moved.

After two weeks, the retirement community he had chosen agreed to interview online. Thankfully, they agreed to offer him a place to live regardless of whether or not the job worked out.

Chapter 40

Lennie - Morna Blair - Year 19

Lennie checked the coffee pot. Empty. It emptied too fast these days. Anne's picture sat next to it. Her smile cheered him up. Maybe that was it. He needed her smile to brighten his days, and drank too much coffee in the process. He picked up the empty coffee pot. Mostly empty. Old coffee had made a thick slurry in the bottom that never went away, except when Tracie stopped by to clean his office for him.

A knock sounded at the door.

Lennie looked up.

A woman stood at the open door. Frazzled hair framed a lined face. Her clothing had gone out of style a decade ago. Or more.

He waved to her. "Come in. How may I help you?"

She stepped in and looked all around the tiny office before closing the door behind her. She sat down and faced him.

"Would you like coffee? Going for more water." He held up the empty pot. The sludge swirled around the bottom.

"No thanks."

"How may I help you?"

"May I talk safely here?"

"Definitely. Full confidentiality, unless harm will come to you, or another."

"Go run your water. Be sure to clean the sludge out good."

He nodded. When he returned, the woman had not moved. He filled the machine and waited for its pleasant gurgle.

The woman stared at her hands and began her story.

Case File

Focus: Morna Blair, female, age 50
Reporter: Morna Blair, female, age 50
Abuser: Society
Abuse type: Financial, Abandonment
Family:

Husband - Orvel Blair, male, age 52
Daughter - Nora Blair, female, age 28

Interview

"I am Morna Blair. I was happy for a long time. Or, thought I was." She twisted her hands before looking up at him. "After thirty years of marriage, I no longer know who I am, or what I want with my life. I want to do something."

"Where do you work?"

"I never worked. Oh, I had a few part time jobs before I married. Nothing important. Once my daughter was born, she needed me there constantly. Her health conditions required that I be there all the time when she was home. I never had time to do anything, or even a hobby. Other than occasionally read."

"She's not there anymore."

Morna closed her eyes. "Nora doesn't need me anymore. At least, not now. Her health improved, and she can take care of it herself. She is about to graduate from college with a young daughter of her own."

"That sounds delightful." This woman was only a few years older than he himself was. Would Anne have wanted him to wait this long for her to return? Too long, he skipped having children. Most of his friends who had married would have their own grandchildren in a few years.

"No. She'll be moving to another city. I won't see Nora, or my granddaughter regularly. Maybe a few times a year. What will I do?"

"You are married?"

"Yes. I rarely see my husband. Orvel has his job. Friends. Hobbies. He only comes home a few nights a week. He doesn't tell me where he is."

"That's not good. You have nothing in common with him?"

"Our daughter and granddaughter."

"When did he stop coming home?"

"When Nora was little. He had to work two jobs to pay for her medical care. He was at work. I took care of her."

"You want what now?"

"I want a divorce. I can find my place in life. Find what I gave up thirty years ago. I want to move near my daughter and granddaughter."

"Couldn't your husband go with you?"

Morna laughed. "Orvel won't go. He has no interest in moving. Not to the town Nora is going to. He doesn't like the mountains of Colorado. His family was from there."

"Can you go by yourself?" Lennie poured fresh hot coffee into his cup.

"I have no income. If I go, I'll lose everything. I don't have enough work credits for social security. I'll have no income, no job, no place to live, no food, and no medical care. I need those."

"Have you searched for a job online?"

"For two years. No return emails, or phone calls. I'm sure it's because I have no work history."

Lennie closed his eyes as he sipped the hot coffee. A common happening. More common to his parents and grandparent's generations, when women rarely left the home to work. "You do have computer skills?"

"Yes. Not as good as Nora's. Her daughter was teaching me more."

"What do you like to do?"

Morna stared at her trembling hands. "I don't know. I don't remember. I've taken care of my daughter, her illnesses, the bills, the house, and working with repair people when needed."

"You want to go to Colorado?"

She looked up. "Yes. Nora will be there with my granddaughter."

Lennie tapped the table. So many options. A few good. Others, not so good. Karen wanted them to expand to Colorado. Could this woman handle the work Janella did? She could have that position in a new facility.

"Are you in any danger?"

"No."

"When does your daughter graduate?"

"In three months. She will leave for Colorado a week later."

"Three months. That isn't much time. May I ask, would you be willing to go to Alabama for a few weeks?"

"A few weeks? What's there?"

"A special training facility for adults preparing to start new lives. If it works out, you will be trained, and we will determine where you go from there."

"How will I pay for it, and my living expenses?"

"It's more like on the job training. A couple of weeks to test if you are able to do the job."

"When would I go?"

"Could you go next week, if we arrange it?"

"My daughter isn't ready to be on her own. I wanted three more months."

"You'll have them, I'm sure. Give Nora two weeks to test her skills before she is alone in that city in Colorado."

"You drive a tough bargain."

"You've nothing to lose. Everything to gain. Including being close to your daughter and granddaughter."

Morna smiled. "What do I tell everyone?"

"Tell them nothing. If your husband asks, you are going to train for a part time job. Nora needs to know that. Let her know there is a possibility that you will have a job waiting when you come home."

Morna stood up and offered her hand. "Thanks."

Lennie shook her hand. "I'll call you if there are any problems, and to give you the location and time for you to prepare to go. Not sure if you'll be flying, or riding with others."

She nodded and squared her shoulders. "I'll be ready." Morna left the office. The door clicked shut.

Lennie chuckled. There were answers. Their program was giving jobs to those most in need. Thanks to Ruby Duffy.

He opened his email program. Karen, Janella, and Jo would need the facts on this case.

There were several types of financial abuse. Employers who refused to pay a living wage, insurance companies who didn't cover necessary medical treatments, including glasses and hearing aids that made good paying jobs an option. There was elder financial abuse, or disabled financial abuse, where the abuser used the recipient's money for their own good, not that of the recipient. Last of course, were those people who were held in marriages, or other living situations, in order to have basic life needs met.

In this case, they needed a future care manager. Morna Blair would be perfect. If she passed the tests. Especially Janella's personality test.

Rescue

Lennie chuckled as he read the email. The fifth since Morna Blair arrived in Alabama. A few more days, and she'd return home.

Morna had passed every test. She had infuriated Janella by not offering to help her. That had never happened to her before. Fully capable adults assumed Janella needed help for tasks she could readily complete. Janella had been so shocked, she wasn't sure Morna was paying attention. She found one of the toddler girls, and had her feign a sprained ankle in front of Morna, to see to her reaction. It worked.

Morna was great with everyone there. She enjoyed working with the women, children, and even the men. Her favorite thing was inventory, and marking off the supply lists as trucks delivered needed supplies. She could cook. She didn't enjoy it.

This email from Jo was even more influential. Jo requested that Morna stay an extra week, while she and Karen picked out a place in Colorado. Morna could transfer there once it was ready, to prepare for survivors. Janella and her children would go with her. Jo would stay in Alabama.

Lennie typed his response. It would be totally up to Morna to stay an extra week or not. As the email disappeared from his screen, his thoughts crept back over recent discussions.

Chris was moving to be closer to the Arizona facility. His niece, Zadema, would be joining him in the fight against Pastor Stork there. Tracie had already found a base there to work. In a few weeks, Lennie would be the only one of the original group left in their town.

Anne had not been found.

A tear dripped off his cheek.

Release

Four months passed before Morna Blair was able to begin preparing the facility in Colorado. Morna settled in organizing the new location. Her daughter, Nora, was an hour away.

Orvel Blair had not contested the divorce. In fact, he decided to sell the house and move to the Caribbean. This gave the lawyers an interesting job figuring out how to split the marital proceeds. It turned out, Orvel had hidden several accounts from his wife. Among other things he had hidden. Including two mistresses, another daughter, and two sons.

Lennie drove home alone at night to a mostly empty house. All of his income had been saved for the day they found Anne. His furniture was the same he had had in college. Signs of wear and tear were evident. Would she even want to come here? Would she consider him broke?

Was he broke?

Chris was over an hour away, and didn't join him for dinner anymore. He ate with Zadema and Tracie in their new facility outside Home Track Village.

Lennie pulled a frozen meal out to heat. It wasn't much. And had no taste.

Chapter 41

Jo - Burn Out! - Year 20

"At least I'll live near my sister." Janella rolled up to the desk. "Brenton will go live with her for a year or two. It would be good for him. And Carina."

"They grew up in the program. They'll miss you. The children in Colorado won't have the same opportunities without them."

"They're almost grown. They need an opportunity to see how healthy people live. In healthy relationships. I hope I haven't waited too long."

"Do they want to go to your sister's house?"

"Yes. They like visiting her. Her three children will benefit."

"You leave tomorrow. Morna Blair will meet you. I'll miss you."

"You need to stay here. We'll be spread thin soon. More locations opening. I heard we'd have one in Idaho soon, overdue there."

"Overdue everywhere. Spread too thin. Most want to stay. Children growing up in care. Men and women locked in legal limbo for five to ten years until they are free. Only then do they truly begin to heal. By that time, their children have spent most of their memorable years locked in the safe stations we have created. Is that a good life for them?"

"Better than the alternative."

"I know." Jo closed her laptop. "I'll take good care of Brenton and Carina for you. They leave next week?"

"Yeah. My sister had this vacation planned for a while. A good idea. She'll raise them for a few years."

"I think you raised them. They are more mature than most children out there on their own."

"Thanks." Janella sat her empty coffee cup on the counter and turned her chair to leave the office. "I'll miss you too."

Case File

Focus: Jo Forester, female, age 38 and Janella Lamar, female, age 40
Reporter: Self
Abuser: Overwork
Abuse type: Burn out
Family:
Brenton Lamar, male, age 14
Carina Lamar, female, age 10

Interview

Jo walked through the schoolroom barrack style building.

Janella had been gone for two days. Her trip had ended with a fiasco at the airport. Janella had been ordered to stand up and let her chair be x-rayed by itself. They refused to provide her a chair to sit in while they did so. Finally, Karen, Ruby Duffy, and her sister, Tarina Owens, called to intervene. They released Janella to the care of Morna Blair. Their words. They even told her not to travel alone without a helper. They had even managed to break the wheelchair, and refused to even accept the claim. The frame was bent to where the wheels could not turn properly.

The school room was crowded. Due to the backgrounds of the majority of the students, the school was set up in a Montessori style. Students of all ages participated in various activities where they were most comfortable. It worked, and allowed students to start where they were, and learn in ways that worked best for them. As they could. The demons of their pasts haunted them while they tried to learn.

Carina sat with a few girls, and one boy, showing them how to sew doll clothes. A couple of other students, one who have never spoken a word, sat nearby, possible listening while building with blocks.

Brenton stood by a small group of easels talking with a few other students about the colors of paint. His painting smock was covered in greens and blues. A yellow sun dominated his painting.

Green grass bloomed with colorful flowers fed by a bubbling brook. An open book nestled on a small boulder. Almost out of view a splash of a calico skirt whisked out of the scene.

Jo walked up Brenton. "Are you ready to go tomorrow?"

"I'll miss my friends here. It'll be good to be back near mom. I miss her."

"Would you rather go to her village than your aunt's home?"

"No. Yes. Sis needs the opportunity to decide what kind of life she wants to live. I will go help mom later. Be a driver, maybe. I'd enjoy that." Brenton dipped the sky-blue paint brush in the water cup.

"Would she be okay with your aunt by herself?"

"For a few days. We've been here so long; she doesn't remember life before the villages. I don't either. She needs me." He wiped the brush dry before choosing another one. "Don't separate us."

"I won't." Jo walked over to Carina. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"Sure. I don't want to ride in a plane. After what happened to mom. What will they do to me?"

One of the girls beside her leaned forward. "Those people in airports aren't nice. Not toward little girls."

"I'm not that little." Carina handed her the folded doll shirt.

"That could be worse." A fifteen-year-old girl across the circle's pregnant belly declared the results of what had happened to her in an airport.

Carina glanced at her. "Do we have to?"

Jo closed her eyes. This was wrong. To send kids alone in an airplane. Thirty or forty years ago, it would have been safe. Today, airports were a dangerous place for a teen. Even if she had lived in an abuse survivor village almost her entire life.

"I'll call your mom. It is up to her."

"I don't want to go to public school. The kids who come here talk about how it is. And it isn't like this. Or like the online schools at Home Track Village."

Jo wanted to reach out to her. Carina had never shown fear before.

We need a better solution. A safer one. One where we transport people from village to village if needed. Cars, trucks, vans, busses, weren't safe enough at times. If the abuser knew their victim was escaping.

"I'll call your mom right away. I think you are right. I don't want you traveling alone."

Jo reached her office. The light was on. Papers waited on her desk.

Jalindel stood next to the window. She turned to face Jo. "You have to do something for Wendell. You sent him up north. They don't understand him."

Jo walked past Jalindel to her desk. "His dialect is different than theirs. Give him, and them, time to adjust."

"Can he take my job? I'll join Janella in Colorado."

"Think that's a good idea?"

"Truckers are the main people I speak to. If my dialect is different, no one will know. Or care."

"I'll talk to Janella. I need to call her now anyway."

Jalindel's phone buzzed. "Next order. Have to guard the gates."

"Thanks."

Jalindel walked out of the room. Her shoulders drooped more than normal.

This was becoming too much. Over twenty years spent working and trying to rescue others. It was time to recover herself.

"Janella, any ideas? I don't want to send Carina through airport security."

Janella said something to someone behind her. "Nor do I. I didn't feel that way a few weeks ago."

"What do you recommend?"

"Chris said Nick and Bran Garber have a plan. They have both tested for their flying license. They've asked Ruby Duffy to help them buy a small plane. It will be a great benefit for all of us."

"Are Brenton and Carina staying then?"

"Yes. Until Nick and Bran are ready. I'll cancel their tickets."

"Okay." Jo turned back to her laptop. She sent a message to have Brenton and Carina sent to her office in an hour. They'd be fine here until Nick and Bran Garber were ready to fly.

Rescue

Brenton and Carina stayed two more months before they were able to fly to Colorado to join their mother and aunt.

Janella had the Colorado village all set up and working well. With the help of Bendy Sheldon and her daughter, it almost functioned without needing her. Jalindel had joined her, and taken over the hard work.

Jo and Janella flew to Carrizozo to meet with Lennie and Chris.

"I'd like to be designing the newer villages. Not living in them after they are functioning." Janella sipped hot tea.

"Why?" Lennie leaned back in his chair.

"It's so sad. I feel angry that we still need them. And we need more. Far more. Their fear tends to feed into anger for me."

"It isn't easy." Jo leaned back. "I've watched so many arrive in pain. Physical and emotional. A few have died on the journey to freedom. Few leave. They fear life beyond the fence. And those they left behind remain a danger to their lives. Will they remain locked behind gates until they die? How can that be freedom?"

Release

Jo took a few days off to relax in Colorado. She stayed with Janella's sister. Her children kept Jo busy for a few days. They took her on hikes to see the mountains. A sky so close, it seemed almost within reach.

Jo returned from the mountains refreshed and ready to work. Nature needed to be more of a part of the recovery process. Her friends and coworkers greeted her ready with questions, and problems. New rescues roamed the barracks, ready to help those who arrived after them. The tiny school served them all.

Chapter 42

Lennie - Naomi Morris - Year 20

Lennie drove home to his empty house alone. The visit by Jo and Janella had been refreshing. If somewhat depressing, that they had the same concerns he did. His phone beeped a message from Chris as he reached the front door. He stepped inside before checking it.

"Pastor Stork again. Zadema is bringing the victim to the Home Track Village. Be there in the morning."

Lennie clapped his hand to his head. Pastor Stork. Apparently, Pastor Stork had been released by the judge while awaiting trial in the Floriana Bello case. From over two years before. What had he done this time? Of course, the better question might be, what had he not done? There were so many crimes he had committed against women and families, most of which would never be admitted to by the victims, therefore could never be tried in a court of law.

He opened his laptop to the case file.

Case File

Focus: Naomi Morris female, age 16
Reporter: Zadema Tinker, female, age 20
Abuser: Rachel Morris, female, age 40
Abuse type: Neglect due to employment.
Family:
Mother - Rachel Morris, female, age 40

Interview

Lennie arrived at the gate to the Home Track Village. The guard didn't know him, so took his time verifying his identity.

He drove down the narrow winding road. At the village, he parked in the visitor spot.

The village that Janella and Jo had worked to build bubbled with women and children. A refugee camp from abusers, and safe haven

where they sought asylum from the laws that otherwise bound them to live as victims for life. Here, children played and women smiled. One he had helped reach there arrived to greet him.

"I'm here to see Chris and Zadema. They have Naomi Morris with them?"

"This way."

"How long have you been here? Are you doing okay?"

The woman stopped and stared at him. "I've lost count of how long I've been here. I was asked to prepare to go to the new center in Idaho next month. I'll process people in, and assign them places to stay."

"Do you want to go back out into the rest of the world?"

"No. There is nothing for me there. Basic psychology says it is dangerous for me. I might fall into another trap."

"Do we provide enough help?"

She glanced up at the sky. "The programs make an attempt. There is training. Education. Hope. Thing is. When people go back out, they don't have the support system they need. Several have returned, when they realized they slipped back into bad relationships. Even in new states. It isn't enough."

"We need to find them friends before they go?"

"Friends. Or trusted mentors. A place to go and talk. Safety. Like here." She waved as three giggling children raced by, and around their legs in a game of tag.

"Lead on." This meant more to think about. Much more. Although Ruby Duffy's law benefited thousands, the people it helped, remained behind bars for their own safety, of their own free will. It meant they didn't trust their own self-respect, or feared the lack of respect from others.

Lennie was ushered into the tiny meeting room. The walls were covered with posters. Many of which he recognized from his early childhood. They belonged in a high school nurse's office. Children here lived under a cloud. His hope had been to release them from that cloud. Only now, that cloud was the suspicion that they would grow into abusers because they, or their caretaker, had been abused.

A young woman sat at the table. She wiped her eyes. Although her face was tear streaked, it remained defiant.

Tracie stood behind her. "Hi Lennie."

"Hi Tracie. Naomi?"

She nodded.

He sat down. "Tell me your story."

Tracie sat in the empty chair.

Naomi shifted in her seat. "Guess it always was."

A few moments passed. "Always was?"

Naom stared at him. "Mom never had time for me. Too busy with work and church. She left me in Pastor Stork's care from the day I came home from the hospital. If I wasn't in his care, I was in the care of a church member."

Lennie closed his eyes. How long had Pastor Stork been doing what he did now? How many girls had he abused? To what amount?

"I have to know more to help you."

"They let me do whatever I wanted. They never told me no. That wasn't good, I guess. They never knew when mom would come pick me up. So they let me run wild."

"Not healthy. You had no limits?"

"None. One of mom's friends attempted to help me. She reminded me I needed to eat healthy at regular times, with a regular bedtime. Those things mom wouldn't let me do."

"She wouldn't?"

"Or couldn't. She worked the strangest hours. Often, we wouldn't make it home until midnight, have a snack, then be up to go to school and work at 5 am."

"That's not healthy."

"I know. I began asking to go to sleepovers."

She didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"Pastor Stork found out about them, and invited himself to the sleepovers, since the friend's mom was out of town on business. He claimed it was to protect us."

"It wasn't."

Naomi shook her head. "It started out simple enough. Patting our shoulders as we ate dinner. Then more. After a few months, he'd pull one of us alone, into a side room, and touch us." She closed her eyes and squeezed her fists.

The story continued. There were five other young women who slept over at these parties. He'd wake one, and lead her off on one pretense or other. Then, what happened, no one knew about. "I know he woke up at least two of the other girls. Not sure about the last three. They slept in another room. We slept three to a room."

"Were any other men or boys there?"

"They didn't stay the night. I don't think."

"Did the mother of the home know about Pastor Stork being there?"

"Yes. She thought he was there to keep us safe. She told him he could invite friends to stay."

Lennie closed his eyes.

"He invited others?"

"A few of the boys in the youth group. They left before we went to sleep. Their moms would pick them up."

"You are pregnant. Sure, it is his child?"

She nodded. "He promised me a child would make my mom like me more. A baby would make her have time for me."

"It didn't."

"She threw me out of the house. Didn't even let me take my clothes. Said they'd never fit me again anyway."

"Are any of the other young women pregnant?"

"I don't know. I haven't talked to them in a few weeks. I stopped going to the sleepovers when I didn't feel well. Pastor Stork didn't like that. He'd catch me at church and ask when I was going back. He said being alone so much was unhealthy."

"I understand." Lennie added a few notes to the case. The years. Sixteen years old. He glanced up at Naomi. No need to worry the young woman. She was in a bad enough situation as it was. "Has your mom lived here all of her life?"

"Yes."

"And attended Pastor Stork's church?"

"Since she was a child."

"I'll need the names of the other young women. You'll need medical care."

Naomi recited a list of names. "I don't want to leave here. I've nowhere to go."

"You need medical care. We don't have full doctors on staff."

She nodded. "May I leave now?"

"Go ahead. I'll check back if I have any more questions."

Naomi walked out of the room and closed the door.

He made a few more notes on his laptop. "Tracie. It doesn't look good."

"No."

"This young woman may be our ticket to eradicating the Stork from the church. At least this one church."

"I think so."

"Have her genetics tested. I am concerned."

"I could tell."

"Naomi is one of his daughters too. How many children did he father? How many of his own daughters has he fathered children with?"

Tracie shuddered. "Are you sure?"

"Genetics can prove it. We need all three to prove it. Naomi's. The unborn child. And her mother's. If you collect them all."

"I will."

"I'll send this to Karen. Naomi is safe here. Keep her here. This is our chance to stop him. They are all underage."

Rescue

Lennie checked his email. A message from Chris.

"Zadema made the effort to go to the church. She dressed as a teen."

Lennie closed his eyes before he read the next paragraph. Zadema put her life on the line to save others.

"Five teen girls acted half drunk in a corner. She joined them. Soon, Pastor Stork was there, fawning all over them. One of the young women was pregnant, and didn't know who the father was. He fawned on her the most."

Lennie pushed the laptop aside for a moment. Too much. Too many. He pulled it back. He had to know.

"As soon as Zadema asked the young woman's age, Pastor Stork put his hand on Zadema's hip, 'Her age doesn't matter. She is bringing forth the next generation. Will you join her?'"

The email didn't end.

"Zadema reached up and grabbed his hair. Then, she pushed him away. 'Not until I am ready.' He grabbed her. 'You are pretty. You will do as you are told.'"

Zadema being treated like a baby factory? That was frightening.

"Zadema pushed the panic button hidden between her fingers. I rushed in there and pulled Pastor Stork off of her. As Pastor Stork was pulled away, Zadema grabbed hair off the pregnant young woman."

A knock at the door startled him. "Wait a moment."

The rest of the email was basic. Pastor Stork wasn't taken into custody, as he had only touched Zadema inappropriately.

"Come in."

Tracie opened the door. "News."

Lennie smiled. "Good?"

Tracie stepped in and closed the door. "This is one of those bad constitutes good times, right?"

"Yes."

"You were right. Rachel Morris confirmed. She is almost positive Naomi is his daughter."

"Almost positive?"

"Yes. Apparently, he was doing these parties seventeen years ago. And inviting the boys of the youth groups to them."

"Why didn't she protect her daughter?"

Tracie sat down. "It's complicated. In many ways, she had long forgotten what happened. I noticed the drunken trance state she went into when we talked about it. She slipped out of the trance at the end, and asked what we had been talking about."

"Oh no. Did you get the sample?"

"While she was in the trance, yes."

"And if she doesn't remember it, will it be court admissible?"

"Not sure. Karen will know."

Release

It was two months before the results were back from the DNA tests. Pastor Stork was both father, and grandfather, to the child Naomi carried.

Naomi had decided to give birth to the child. Now, she regretted that decision. It wouldn't be an easy birth. There was an extremely

high risk the child would be genetically disabled. Enhanced by the fact that her mother and Pastor Stork were cousins.

Of course, her mother, Rachel Morris, insisted she thought Pastor Stork would protect her child and never hurt here.

Naomi Morris chose to break contact with her mother once she knew the truth. The child would be raised by someone else.

Finally, Chris Stoney was able to arrest Pastor Stork, and many of his youth group during one of his parties. The young women acted drunk and drugged, not knowing what had happened to them. The young men and the Pastor would be in prison for at least a year before the trial. This time, Pastor Stork wouldn't be allowed out before the trial.

It was better than nothing. Naomi Morris, and so many like her had been hurt, lives changed, and altered forever.

Chapter 43

Jo - Ruby Duffy - Year 20

Jo closed the van door. A dead toddler had been found in a creek nearby. There had been no missing child report. After two hours, she had been called. What, a witness? No one seemed to know. Every time she heard of such a case, she thought of tiny Lucy Duffy screaming for her mom as she was dragged from the theater almost a decade ago.

She arrived at the scene where the toddler had been found.

Several police cars blocked the road. A media van parked nearby.

A woman in a police uniform walked up to her.

"I'm Jo Forester. I was called to come down here."

The woman smiled. "I'll show you where the toddler was found."

"A boy or girl?"

"A little girl." The woman led the way to a spot beside the trees. Within the cordoned off area was a tiny impression in the grass, a little larger than a cat would make while napping.

"Isn't much to go on. Anything else?"

The woman nodded. She led her to an evidence bag in a police car trunk. Inside the bag was a tiny pair of shoes.

They looked familiar.

The policewoman turned the bag over. On the bottom was the name "Lucy."

"How long had the toddler been there?"

"I can't give an exact date. She wasn't Lucy. She had only been there maybe a week."

"Then whoever left her knew Lucy."

"That's why we called you."

Jo gulped. "Lucy Duffy should be 12. Those shoes looked far more worn than when I last saw them."

"DNA tests will be run on the toddler. If they have the same father, not the same mother, or other female relation, we may have nothing to go on. There is no DNA for Lucy Duffy or Darby Duffy in the database."

"We can confirm if the toddler is, or is not, related to Ruby Duffy?"

"Yes."

Case File

Focus: Ruby Duffy, female, age 45
Reporter: Jo Forester, female, age 38
Abuser: Liam Duffy, male, age 43
Abuse type: Physical, Kidnapping
Family:
Ex-husband - Liam Duffy, male, age 43
Son - Darby (Clancy) Duffy, male, age 16
Daughter - Lucy (Emma) Duffy, female, age - 12
Sister - Tarina Owens - Senator, female, age 50
Others:
Anne Rhoden Mold Bakener, female, age 38
Anne's son - Justus Mold Bakener, male, age 19
Anne's husband - Kyle Mold Bakener, male, age 40

Interview

Two days passed. Jo sat in her tiny office. People buzzed around outside the office like flies. The constant sounds were too much. She had to stay here. Ruby Duffy would arrive any moment.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

One of the newer porters, a young woman from Home Track Village, opened it. "Ruby Duffy is waiting outside. Do you want to meet her in the picnic area?"

Jo smiled. "That would be perfect."

She closed her laptop. A back entrance to the picnic area would have fewer people to interrupt their conversation.

At the picnic area, she chose a table under the portico. Shade would cover them from the heat of the sun. A gentle breeze whispered through the opening, and cooled the sweat that dripped from her clothes.

Ruby Duffy was led around the building. She ran up to Jo and grabbed her hands. "Tell me."

"We don't know much. This toddler may have had Lucy's shoes. I took a picture."

"I wish I could have them."

"They need them for evidence."

"I know. A mother grieves is all. My Lucy. At twelve. Not a mother, I hope. Too young."

"We hope not."

"I was ten when I had my first monthly. It was a shock to my parents. They didn't know what to think of a fourth grader with that problem. Wasn't supposed to happen for years. Or so they thought."

Jo closed her eyes. After Lennie's report about Naomi, anything was possible.

"Do we know anything yet?"

"The child was a toddler. No sign of footsteps. No sign of injury on the grass. They didn't tell me anything. She showed me the shoes."

"And no DNA on my own children. Wish I had done it! It was planned. Scheduled for two days after they were kidnapped."

"I know. We'll do the best we can. We should know something in a week or two. We hope."

"What can we do from here?"

Jo leaned back. How much to explain? "Jalindel who worked here for a while, went to Colorado with her brother Wendell. Before they left they talked about an odd community near them. We've had a few rescues there. We are hoping to find someone that may know something. There are so many child pairs that could fit their description everywhere. The last rescue from that neighborhood arrived this morning. With news."

"News?"

"I have to remind you. Your son wouldn't remember you. Your daughter will have no memory of you. These two have different names. The boy is a teen, and is called Clancy, and the girl 12, is called Emma. No one knows when they arrived. There were two more children with them at one time. One is 19 years old, a boy named Justus, and baby girl. She was last seen a month ago."

"No one knows?"

"The few people we have talked to says there is something odd. Both boys stay in trouble at school. They aren't liked by teachers."

"And the girl?"

"Her teachers say she dresses and acts like a." Jo examined her notes. "Yes. They did say a tramp."

"I want to scream they aren't mine. My children wouldn't act that way."

"Not if raised in your home."

"Do you think?"

"Whether or not, they are going to be investigated this afternoon. I am asking you to stay here. Even if they don't know you, I think these may be your kids. The closest I've ever felt to finding them."

"And the extra boy?"

"I don't know. I know they call him step-brother." These kids. They had to be. Could the extra boy be Anne's? They never knew if the child, or she, had lived or died.

"I'll stay. What may I do to help?"

"What would you like to do?"

Ruby laughed. "No kitchen work. I don't want that. Who may I help?"

Jo smiled. "I'll send the garden team out here. They will be picking the vegetables for tomorrow's meals soon."

Rescue

Jo arrived at the school where the two boys attended.

She was escorted to a tiny office, rather reminiscent of Iona Glenn's office. The woman who met her there was older, tired, and stoop shouldered. She pointed to an empty seat. "I've heard good things about you."

"I try to keep it that way."

She smiled. "These two boys. Something is wrong with them. Justus is pure mean. He'll be expelled for good. He's over age anyway. We've tried to help him. Clancy. It's as if he is on the verge of saying something, and then he closes his eyes, his heart, and his mind."

"Thank you. If he is who I think he is."

"You think you know who he is?"

"May I see his picture?"

The woman pulled up a picture on her laptop.

The resemblance was clear. Too clear.

"Do you have a picture of the sister?"

She pulled up Emma's picture.

Ruby's face stared back at her.

Jo gulped. "I can't say more. Thank you for allowing me to visit them."

"Are you going to take them away today?"

"If they are who I think they are, it may be the only chance. We've almost found them a dozen times. People have died, and we have been a block away from saving them. More than once."

The woman gulped. "I'll call for them."

"Clancy alone please."

The woman nodded.

A few minutes later the young man sauntered into the office. He stared at Jo. Then, he sat down. "I know you. From somewhere. Before."

"Before?"

"When my name was different."

"Tell me about your family."

"It's wrong. Dad and sis and I live with a man, his wife, and her son. He's my friend. Only. Was."

"Yes?"

"I think. I can't say what I think. My sister. Can you protect her?"

"I will." The chance of success was high; failure wasn't something she would allow to happen. Not again. Young Lucy wouldn't escape from care as she had before.

"I remember your face. From somewhere. In a circle of light."

Jo nodded. It would have seemed like that as they were dragged away. "Will you wait for me in the next office? I have to talk to one more student today."

"Please don't talk to my step-brother. He isn't nice."

"Really?"

"He's my friend sometimes. I think he hurt my sister."

"Do you know the names of his parents?"

The boy glanced away, then back to Jo. "They've never been spoken aloud."

"I have to speak to your step-brother. It's important."

"I don't trust him."

"You live with him."

"I know. I have to keep the peace to survive."

"Please?"

"Okay." His shoulders slumped as he stood up. Clancy, or was he Darby, glared at her as he walked out of the room.

Ten minutes later, Justus was ushered into the room. He sat down across from her and glared at her.

Jo blinked. Yes. Anne was quite clear in his countenance. Even in the way he held his eyes and defied her hello.

"Will you speak to me?"

He glared at her. His fists pounded the table. "You are female. You may only speak when spoken to. I don't speak to females who don't follow the rules of society."

Jo blinked. His thought patterns were identical to Kyle Mold. Although, he had a different last name. That could have been changed to hide their whereabouts. "Okay." She left the room and closed the door behind her.

The guard was outside.

"Don't let him leave," she whispered. Clancy had been right. This Justus could be dangerous. If he had a phone, he could be texting his father, or Liam, right now.

Jo rushed into the other room. "Where is your sister?"

Clancy looked up. "She is at home. Justus's mother didn't feel well."

"We are going now." She held out her hand.

He smiled and took it.

They raced down the hallway.

Within minutes, they were on the road and turning down a lane to a series of shacks.

"We live in the middle place." Clancy said. "I don't like it. It's not home."

Jo nodded. Better for Ruby to never know her children were here. She parked. "Hand me that wig please?"

Clancy glanced at her before he did so.

She settled it on her head. "Let's go. We have to pick up Emma, and Justus's mom. Now. No time for things."

He opened the door. "Hurry. Scared."

She ran into the tiny shack. It was held together by bailing wire and torn rags. The roof caved in instead of standing up straight.

A woman reclined on a broken couch. Bruises covered her face. Her arm was bent at an unnatural angle.

A young girl sat by her side with a rag.

Clancy grabbed the girl. "Come on Emma. We have to go. Now."

Emma lowered her head.

The woman on the couch struggled to rise. "I must stay with my husband. It is commanded."

Jo grabbed her arm. "You are going to a hospital. Now. Your 'home' is condemned." She pulled her out of the crumpling shack.

"I can't." The woman pulled away.

Jo pulled harder. "You will. Or you will be arrested and put in prison."

The woman sank to the ground. "No."

"Come." Jo pulled at her good arm.

Clancy returned and helped her up off the ground. "We have to go. Hurry. Don't trust."

They managed to pull her into the van, and onto the floor.

"My son."

"We will find him. Later." Jo hit the gas hard and spun the tires. The woman was Anne. No doubt. Would Lennie be overjoyed, or overpained?

The drive back to the village would take an hour. She pushed the speed limit.

Before long, a battered pickup truck pulled up behind them.

Clancy looked back. His face paled. "She's asleep. The pain is bad."

"I'm scared." Emma cried.

"Suggestions?"

"No. I'm not really Clancy, am I?"

Jo smiled. "I don't think so."

"I remember. I had a mom. Once." The young man watched the side mirror.

"You still do. She misses you."

"If he's not Clancy, am I Emma?"

"No. You are a wonderful young woman."

"They are getting closer. I'm scared." Clancy turned toward her.

"I'm only going to tell you once. Both of you. Please lay flat on the floor. Cover yourselves with those bullet proof blankets on the wall. Cover Anne too."

Clancy slipped out of the seat. "That is her name, isn't it?" He covered himself and his sister.

"Yes."

Jo stared in the rearview mirror. A gun was pointed at her tires. "Hold on. You aren't like that counselor said."

"I have to protect my sister. I didn't do enough."

A gun shot rang out.

They had 15 miles to go. Jo turned up the dispatch radio. Her dispatch group would be listening.

"Who are we? I don't remember?"

Another gun shot hit one tire.

Ten miles to go. "Backup!"

The van coasted to a stop. She couldn't go further without engaging the second set of tires.

By the time she had them dropped, the truck was beside them. The leering face had to be that of Kyle Mold. Justus was beside him.

She put the van in gear and pushed forward.

Emma cried as the van lurched forward.

The pickup truck jumped back behind them.

The road was busy. No choice. She hit the button that dropped two spikes on the road. The machine that did it adjusted for tire width.

Sure enough, the truck spun out of control.

A police car raced to the scene.

"Keep going!" Her radio blared.

Jo didn't stop. Her cargo mattered too much.

Release

Jo sat at the table under the portico.

A full mobile medical team arrived to care for Anne. Her wounds were grievous. Internal bleeding. Several broken ribs. It looked like they had all been broken in the last sixteen years, and healed. A few at a time. She even had a semi-healed broken wrist.

Emma had been checked medically. She had been pregnant. She admitted to having the baby, and leaving it in the woods. The father had been Justus. He had killed the baby because it cried and kept him awake at night. Emma had a partially healed broken arm. It seemed Justus had his father's attitude of jerking women around by the arm.

There was no doubt in Jo's eyes, or Ruby's. Emma was Lucy Darby. Now, they would have to wait on medical proof.

For the moment, Ruby sat with Clancy and Emma. They talked. It was painful. She knew Ruby wanted to gather the girl in her arms and protect her from every evil in the world.

"I don't remember being called Lucy. What do you last remember of me?"

"Your first steps. And a few words."

The young woman smiled through her tears. "I hope those are happy memories."

Ruby hugged her. "They are. We will make new happy memories."

"I knew I had another name. I was afraid of it. I was called Darby?"

"Yes. You were afraid of it because teachers who tried to protect you ended up hurt. One died."

He covered his eyes.

Jo reached over to him. "It wasn't your fault. You tried to bring you and your sister home safe."

"She died for me?"

"She did. And because of her death, thousands have been rescued. That is what set off your mother's law to protect women and children."

"May I eventually see her grave?"

"We will go there one day. When it is safe to do so."

"Will we stay here? I don't want father to find us."

"He won't." Jo closed her alert. "For your safety, we are sending both of you and your mom to the Colorado system where Janella is waiting for you."

"And the woman you called Anne?"

Jo closed her eyes. She wasn't sure Anne would live. If she found out the truth about her son. "She will be sent to Arizona as soon as she is able to travel."

"Will she be safe?" Emma Lucy leaned over to her.

"She will. As long as she wants to be."

"She'll fight it. She made me stay there, even when Justus did those things to me. She said that was the reason women were made."

Jo closed her eyes. "It's not. Don't let anyone tell you that. Ever again."

Chapter 44

Anne is Found

Lennie swirled the coffee in his cup. One more swish and the last drops would be gone. The last drops of his old life. And the dreams of the new life, no matter how broken Anne might be. Her son Justus was almost grown now. Not someone Anne should be around, or Lennie would want to be around. Thankfully, the young man would be in prison for murder, and attempted murder, for a while. Perhaps he could find the help he so badly needed.

He swished the coffee and drank the last drop. His office looked the same. Except for Anne's picture. It was no longer on the printer. He held it in his hand, re-memorizing every feature, every line, every smile. Although she couldn't be the same, neither was he. He'd help her heal. Not only the broken bones. Her spirit and mind must heal. Seventeen years of abuse would not wash away in a word. Or a touch. He wouldn't give up.

Case File

Focus: Anne Rhoden Mold Bakener, female, age 38
Reporter: Jo Forester, female, age 38
Abuser: Kyle Mold Bakener, male 40
Abuse type: Physical, Verbal, Sexual
Family:
Mother - Mary Rhoden, female, age 70
Father - Dan Rhoden, male, age 72
Husband - Kyle Mold Bakener, male, age 40
Son - Justus Mold Bakener, male, age 19

Interview

Lennie walked into the guarded hospital room in Albuquerque. It was stark and bare. No sign of life or color. Anne would be on the other side of the curtain. The flowers in his hands would brighten her room. And hopefully, her heart.

He reached for the curtain. He could not show fear in front of her. Fear for the lost years. Pain at the sight of her broken body.

She could not take a deep breath. The machines breathed for her. Two punctured lungs. Broken ribs. Broken wrist. And the memories of seventeen years of abuse. As many years of abuse as the free life she had led before.

Would she even remember him?

He pushed back the curtain.

Anne's eyes were closed. Her arms as straight as possible, with splints, IVs, and poles all around her.

Had she heard him and was afraid to look at him? Afraid of what he might say or do? That he might run at the sight of her?

He took a step forward.

No sign of movement.

He placed the bouquet of flowers on the tray so that her eyes would see them first when they opened. Simple flowers. Wild flowers. Like the ones they used to pick together as teens. A single yellow rose towered over the top. The same color as the rose he gave her when he begged her to marry him all those years ago.

A tear dripped off his nose and landed on one of the yellow petals.

He sank into the chair beside the hospital bed.

The machines hooked to Anne beeped.

Lennie reached his hand across the edge and clasped her hand gently. The hand on this side of the bed was the broken hand. Her left hand. The one that should have worn the wedding band he had scrimped and saved and hoped they would pick out together, nearly two decades ago. If only this hand had worn his ring. It would never have been broken.

Her eyes fluttered on the pillow. Her lips moved.

He gazed at her. Time for words would be later. After she was healed.

A tear dripped from her eyes.

He didn't let go.

Rescue

Anne's physical recovery would be long. Her bones had to heal. She was little more than a skeleton. Once she could talk, she said little. Only that she wasn't hungry when the doctors persuaded her to eat on her own.

"Anne, you can eat. You may even have solid food now."

"Solid food is for small children. And men. I'm not either."

Lennie closed his eyes. Her mind and heart would take longer to heal.

"Tell me how Justus is? He hasn't been to see me."

Lennie fought back the truth. She had screamed and almost burst her recently healed lungs last time he told her. "He isn't able to visit."

She closed her eyes. "My only child. Why did I only have one? I should have had a dozen to make Kyle happy. I guess he won't visit me either."

"No. Not now." Not ever, if Lennie could prevent it.

"He is my husband. I did my best to do everything he said for me to do. I'm so tired. I tried to take care of Clancy and Emma too. Such sweet little children."

They were sweet. And happily, in Colorado recovering with their mother.

"Will they visit me?"

"If you would like them to, it will be arranged."

"Please do."

"Anne."

She looked up at him from the hospital bed.

"Please try to recover. I have to go back to work tomorrow. I'll be back soon."

She closed her eyes. "Lennie, no. I don't deserve you. You deserve someone born decent. I wasn't. I'm sorry you waited so many years. I am married to Kyle. That is all I deserve."

Lennie closed his eyes. Kyle didn't deserve any woman. Anne deserved the best life had to offer. She always had.

"Tracie has a place for you to go to next week."

"I can't go. I have to go home to Kyle."

"Anne." He gripped her hand. "I'm going to explain this in the simplest terms. If you want to return to Alabama, and Kyle's shack, you may. If you do, you will be arrested and in jail on child abuse and accessory to murder charges."

She stared at him.

"That shack was no place for any living thing. It was so tumble down, even a mouse shouldn't be living in it. No humans at all."

"I didn't murder anyone. No one did."

"Yes. A tiny baby. Emma's baby was murdered. Justus murdered her."

Anne closed her eyes. "I begged him not to. I tried to bury her."

Lennie touched the white knuckles on her hands.

"Then, when Kyle found out she was dead, he beat me."

"Did Justus beat you too?"

She gaped. "My son never would touch me that way."

Except he had. They had photographs from neighbors. And one of the hand prints on her shoulder matched Justus's hand. Not Kyle's. He had also admitted to beating her. And kicking her in the face in the past. Her son had kicked out her three front teeth.

"I have to go to my husband."

"If you go with Tracie, you will have a chance to heal. Charges against you will be lighter." It would prove the abuse had caused the neglect. She was too broken to fix the problems she couldn't see and thought were normal daily life. She had lived half her life that way.

"I have to go to my husband."

"He is in prison. For men only. You won't see him until the trial. At least a year away."

"I'd be able to see my son. You won't deny me my little Justus."

Lennie wanted to groan at the insinuation. He didn't dare. "He is in prison. You will go to a women's prison if you go back there."

Anne closed her eyes. "I guess I will go with Tracie then. Will she have room for me?"

Lennie smiled. "Plenty of room. Lots of women there. And children of all ages. Even cats. I know you miss those."

Anne smiled. "I'm sorry Lennie. I wish I had been born of a legitimate marriage so we could have married. I had to marry Kyle. You do understand, don't you?"

Lennie nodded. He did understand. As broken as it was, he understood what tricks had been played on her mind. She had never known Pastor Stork personally. She had gone to a church of one of his early party going youth club members. One Naomi had known well, as too touchy feely. Almost a clone for Pastor Stork.

Release

Even at the Home Track Village, Anne's recovery was slow. She rarely walked. The younger women would push her in a wheelchair through the gardens.

Her son and husband were both found guilty of murder and attempted murder. They would be in prison for a long time because they had been found with Ruby Duffy's children. That seemed to clinch the matter. Both Justus and Kyle had sexually abused the young Lucy. It appeared the abuse began almost as soon as Liam joined up with them, so that Anne could take care of all three children. Neither had been remorseful of their sexual abuse of young Lucy.

Liam. That was another story. He was found dead in a ditch. Apparently, though not proven, Kyle or Justus had killed him in revenge for being turned in. Or perhaps for the killing of the baby girl. There had been a report that a male voice had reported the baby's body. Perhaps, he had followed Anne, and reported it, hoping to protect his daughter. A dozen years too late.

Lennie visited the village every chance he could.

Anne would watch him and speak to him. She kept her distance. And refused to divorce Kyle. A judge had ordered that she never have any contact with him again in her life if she wanted to live outside of prison.

The village itself was a prison of sorts. Subconsciously, she must have known it. The prison that her mind had been locked in since childhood could not be breached. Occasionally, a beam of light, a memory of happiness, even a laugh would sneak out, reminding Lennie why he loved her through it all. Even if the bars between them could never be bent.

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Thank you for reading Cracks in the Walls. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite online retailer and share it on social media. Choose another fiction, or nonfiction, title to explore on your journey through the myths society has encouraged us to live by.

Thanks!

Abagail Brown

About the Author

Abagail Brown has lived, and continues to live, with the subject matter in her fiction and non-fiction. An abusive past, multiple disabilities, gluten intolerance, and self-publishing are subjects she knows about from the inside out. She lives now in a supportive environment with a loving husband and furfriends Rocky and Mel. With the aid of cats, dogs, and art, she reaches out to help others stumble less along the path to a future for all, regardless of their past, present, or future.

Other Books by Abagail Brown

Shadows in the Mirror

Mistie escaped a past she'd mostly forgotten.

No one would go looking for her buried past if she lived up to her dreams.

Or so she believed.

Smoky tendrils wrapped the horrors she couldn't quite remember.

Flickering shadows crept through the mirror to bring her past to her present.

Nightmare generational abuse on a scale she never imagined.

Never knew she had been part of.

Didn't want in her past.

Or her future.

Secrets are twin sisters.

Whether fraternal or identical depends on the shadows dancing in the mirror.

Teaser Chapter

Shadows in the Mirror

Beige walls blurred in the noisy, crowded classroom.

"What happens if I mix beaker A with beaker B?" The teacher ignored the raised hands and focused on the quiet boy with glasses too big for his face.

Mistie attempted to focus on class. Chemistry. The meaning of life.

The teacher droned on about the dangers of mixing many common household chemicals. Baking soda, vinegar, peroxide, rubbing alcohol, and bleach were her choices for today's assignment.

As if they were ever seen in a home. Not that Mistie's home was normal. Maybe they did exist in other homes.

Knowing she would be called out of class in a few minutes made the hour drag on endlessly.

The letter said she had to meet Liza at 10:30. She folded it and tucked it into her book. It was 10:29 now. Of course, she couldn't leave until the office called her name over the loudspeaker, which would make her late to the meeting. Finding the office in the maze of hallways could take five minutes, or more.

"Please send Mistie Jolin to the office." The loudspeaker echoed though the room.

The teacher slowed the lecture to glance at her.

A few students gave her puzzled looks, while others smiled.

The quiet girl, being called out, not a good impression in a new school. Mistie grabbed her books and left.

These meetings with Liza always occurred about this time of year. What was their real purpose? When would they end? Why did the schools always insist she be late for the meetings? Didn't they know that made her look incompetent?

Mistie strolled through the halls as quickly as she could. She walked down the blue hallway, then the green, and turned at the red hallway. Oops. The red hallway ended at the cafeteria. She stopped, sat down, and pulled out the building map she had been given a week ago, when she began classes here.

She had to go part way back up the red hallway, to turn left at the purple hallway, and right down the green hallway, to the yellow center section of the building.

By the time I figure out where I need to be in this school, the year, and graduation, will be over. She stood up slowly. No one had seen her. Misty spread the map out on top of her books and walked toward the purple hallway. Liza's letter fluttered underneath, in case any teacher stopped her to see why she was wandering the halls during the middle of morning classes.

Finally, she found the office buried in the middle of the building. She glanced at her watch. Eight minutes late! She ran to the office door, slammed it open, and skidded to a stop at the front desk, out of breath.

"The open office on the left." The lady at the reception desk glared at her.

Mistie gulped and walked to the room.

There was Liza. Tall, thin, and with her notepad beside her. The woman who always seemed to find where she lived. Once a year, Mistie had to report to her and answer questions, though no one told her why.

As a young child, it was fun to have a once year friend. Now, not so much. Who is this person? How did she found Mistie after every move? Why did she follow her and ask such odd questions once a year?

Mistie squared her shoulders and took two deep breaths. She gripped her books to her chest, and walked into the room.

"Hello Mistie, how are you?"

She looked at the woman across from her. Really looked. Not a hidden glance, like in previous years.

This woman was older. Older than her mother. Stranger. Quieter. Nicer. Oddly strange though. Not like the hyper busy people she met in the schools she attended.

Liza sat surrounded by notebooks and papers, her glasses askew on her face. "You can close the door. Our talks are always confidential. We have been such good friends. Did you ever have another friend like me?"

Mistie didn't move.

"Mistie, close the door and sit down. Don't act afraid."

Mistie shifted her feet. "I won't close the door. This time, I have the questions to ask of you."

Silence filled the room.

Mistie stared at Liza.

Liza's pen fluttered between two fingers.

"Okay, what are your questions?"

Thoughts raced through Mistie's head. She had rehearsed her speech a thousand times since the letter came that another appointment would be today. Oddly, those letters always came through the school nurse. She had never received one at home.

"Have you always filled out a questionnaire on me?"

Liza looked down at her papers and pen, then back up at Mistie. "Not always. I'm here to be your friend."

Mistie stared hard at her. "I'm not five! Do you think I am mentally ill, or something?"

Liza almost stood up. "Oh goodness no. Dear me. Child close the door and sit down."

Silence descended in the office behind her.

"I am not a child. I only see you once a year. You follow me everywhere I have ever moved. I have the right to know why. Are you going to follow me through my future workplaces as well?"

Liza looked over, then under her glasses, and pushed them up her nose to look through them, at this tall girl in front of her. "Yes, you are grown. Seeing someone once a year, you don't realize how fast they grow. It seems you were only five a few days ago."

Mistie moved her feet occasionally. Patiently waiting, as did the now silent office staff.

At last, to break the silence, she spoke. "Who are you really? What do you really want?"

Liza glanced back at the papers. "I want to know you, to know about you, and your life. My name is really Liza. Please sit, and tell me about how your life has been for the last year. Do you like this new school?"

Mistie laughed. "How can I know? I've been here a week. I don't even know my teacher's names. I couldn't find the office today on the first try. As usual, the teachers refused to let me leave class in time to be here on time for our meeting. How do they expect me to

show I am responsible if they refuse to allow me to be on time for a simple meeting?"

Liza only watched her. Her pencil balanced over her paper.

Mistie walked forward and sat down. "I want to see your questionnaire."

Liza glared at her and slid it over.

Mistie studied the questionnaire, half filled in, her name, height, weight, eye color; even her hairstyle and clothes were documented. The other questions were silly like how many friends she had, who they were, if they were popular, what her home life was like. She remembered these, asked every year, always worded a bit different. The same questions every year.

Mistie looked up at Liza, "Why?"

"I really can't answer that. It's important."

"You don't do this to other kids. I've asked."

Liza jumped. "You have? We do ask other kids as well."

"Who are you, and why do you ask others these questions if you are not a psychologist?"

"It's a secret. Don't you like secrets?"

"Liza, I'm not five. I realize secrets and lies are twin sisters, now whether identical or fraternal, depends on the situation."

The look on Liza's face startled Mistie. Multiple emotions raced through her face as it turned red, almost purple, and then back to a pasty pale. More pale than normal.

"Don't you remember all the fun we used to have? Chatting like friends, and you telling me stories about your life."

"A bit one sided, don't you think?"

"Remember when you told me about."

"I think it is time for me to leave." Mistie stood up and turned.

The whole office stared in the conference room door at her. All of these adults who had no idea who she was, were probably afraid she was some escaped kiddie criminal now.

A loud growl escaped her stomach. That's unusual. I ate three days ago.

The crowd stepped closer, blocking her into the room with Liza. Apparently, they expected the meeting to continue.

It could. On Mistie's terms. She turned back to face Liza. "You want to know my secrets? I have no friends. Moving every few months prevents it."

She glanced back at the office people. "I wish I knew why I am forced to move. Maybe you can tell me?"

Liza watched her, not even trying to write notes down.

"No one even noticed my obsessive compulsive control disorder. I've been battling it for years. I learned about it by reading. Now, I have it mostly under control. No longer addicted to cleaning, chewing gum, or writing down what I do every minute of every day."

An unknown person in the crowd gasped.

Mistie stepped forward and placed her hands on the desk. "No one notices my clothes aren't clean. Or my hair is stringy. I guess they think it is a personal choice."

Liza lifted the pencil, letting it drop. "Why?"

"No one hears me, or sees me. Here I am. Why are you studying me?"

Liza stared hard at her. She grabbed her papers. Ran around the desk, and out through the onlookers.

Mistie closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. At last, she turned around to face the office workers. They parted to make room for her.

A skinny, bald man whom she recognized as the counselor who had scheduled her classes grabbed her arm. "Why don't you wash your clothes and hair?"

Mistie, a foot taller than him, stared down into his bulging eyes. "I have no access to food or water when I am in the house I live in, no matter where we have lived. There is nothing you, or anyone, can do about it."

"Do you want out of there?" One of the women stepped forward.

Mistie wasn't sure who she was. "Yes. I have my plans. Don't mess with them." With that, she turned, walked out the door, and went to the restroom to clean up before she went to her next class. Math. Calculus.

She entered the nearest restroom. A girl from her literature class sat on the floor.

Mistie splashed her face with cold water. "I've never been so shook up after a meeting before."

The girl looked up at her. "Warm water would feel better on your face. Smile, the boys can't get to you in here."

The words of wisdom reminded her of someone she knew. As she searched her mind, and sorted through names, Tricia came to mind. This girl wasn't her.

Mistie stared at her. "Warm water isn't allowed, and I know how to fight the boys. They ignore me anyway. Are you okay?"

"Sure, it's almost class change time. Sick is all."

Mistie glanced at her again.

The girl's stomach bulged above her pants. The tight clothes, and lanky hair didn't help matters any. No, this wasn't Tricia.

Mistie walked out of the room and down the hall to her locker. Where will I be next year? Will Liza find me? How will I escape from this life I know can't be normal?

The class change bell rang.

Mistie glanced at her class schedule and map, and tried to decide which way to turn next.

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